

SERIAL KILLERS AND SERIAL SPECTATORS

CULTURES, NARRATIVES,
AND REPRESENTATIONS

Edited by
Anhiti Patnaik and Elana Gomel



BRILL

Serial Killers and Serial Spectators

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LEIDEN | BOSTON

Cover illustration: Edvard Munch, *Murder* (1906). Photo © Munchmuseet / Ove Kvavik

The Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available online at <https://catalog.loc.gov>
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024000028>

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

ISSN 0927-5754

ISBN 978-90-04-51909-1 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-69280-0 (e-book)

DOI 10.1163/9789004692800

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This book is printed on acid-free paper and produced in a sustainable manner.

Contents

Notes on Contributors vii

Introduction: The Spectacle of Serial Violence in Global Literature and Media 1

PART 1

Seriality of Violence

- 1 Abattoir Elegantiarum: Fashion Victimology and *Hannibal's* Grand Designs 33
 Seth Wilder
- 2 Eat, Sleep, Read, Repeat: Excess and Enjoyment in *Tomie* 56
 Shweta Khilnani
- 3 Caught in Observation: Sublime *tableaux morts* in Female Serial Killer Narratives 70
 Natalia Igl

PART 2

Moral Panics and Murderous Sublime

- 4 “The Horror in Whitechapel”: Sensational Journalism in the Jack the Ripper Murders 89
 Chen F. Michaeli
- 5 (Wo)Mens Rea: The Strange Case of Anne Perry and Murder of/for/by Women 102
 Anhiti Patnaik
- 6 A Poetics of Restlessness: *The House That Jack Built* and the Conventions of Serial Killer Fiction 119
 Luciano Cabral and Pedro Sasse

PART 3

Transnational Evil of Banality

- 7 Murder and Meaning: The Ordinariness of Violence in *Memories of Murder* 139
Reza Pourmikhail
- 8 Lurid and Unlimited: Interpreting Bateman's Banality in *American Psycho* 152
Patrick Lawrence
- 9 The Digital Banal and Sublime Justice in Chinese Internet Literature 166
Lina Qu

PART 4

Spacetime of Violence

- 10 "Blood on the Snow": Nordic Noir as a Fantasy Travelog 185
Elana Gomel
- 11 "*Le immagini ti guardano*": The Gallery City in the *Giallo* Genre of Italian Cinema 205
Peter Vorissis
- 12 *Santushti* and *Jodidar* through Serial Killing in *Raman Raghav 2.0* 223
Aratrika Das

Conclusion: Healing through Horror in a Pandemic—The Editors in Dialogue 238
Anhiti Patnaik and Elana Gomel

Index 249

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The Spectacle of Serial Violence in Global Literature and Media

Shall it be said that the influence of our contemporary literature has engendered a unique monster?

I, Pierre Rivière, MICHEL FOUCAULT



At a dinner party thrown by one of his friends, Arthur Savile—the titular character of Oscar Wilde’s 1891 short story “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime: A Study in Duty”—amusedly presents his palm to be read by Septimus Podgers. Upon glancing at Savile’s palm, Podgers grows pale, shivers, and begins to perspire with discernible fear. He cannot speak, nor can he look away; he is fascinated by what he sees. Wilde describes how the palmist lowers his face so close to Savile’s palm that his spectacles almost touch the skin. He *sees* death in Savile’s hands. Podgers predicts that this handsome young man, soon to become the picture of respectability through marriage, will commit murder. Significantly, Podgers does not mention that Savile’s victim will be none other than himself. Savile is almost driven insane by this ‘diagnosis’ but unquestioningly reconciles himself to his ‘fate.’ His innocent aristocratic fingers are reduced to the diabolic ‘doights du faun’¹ of historical murderers like Pierre François Lacenaire and Jack the Ripper. Savile’s reaction shows us that the mark of Cain is nothing if not repugnant for its commonness, its proletarian ordinariness, and overwhelming banality.

A man who is determined to do his ‘duty,’ Savile sets himself the task to accomplish his murderous destiny without delay. He is desperate to encounter his future in the present moment, no matter how many attempts it takes. Each

¹ Gautier, in an 1852 poem “Study of Hands” described the preserved disembodied hand of Lacenaire and called him a “true murderer and false poet.” The downy animal-like fingers of the hand show that Lacenaire was first and foremost a murderer, then a poet. It was his pose of aesthetic dandyism that distinguished him as a Romantic hero. The poem describes how Lacenaire’s hand traversed an interesting route from being chopped off at the gallows, to phrenological analysis at the autopsy table, and finally, to being displayed as a curio at Maxime du Camp’s salon.

attempt to take a life draws him closer to the predicted act, even if it is a failed attempt. Savile tries again and again to kill and repeatedly performs criminal intent by plotting the death of his casual acquaintances. He lacks a motive to kill, except that he *must* kill. Savile studies poisons, which allies him to another murderous ancestor Thomas Griffiths Wainwright. Wainwright was the eighteenth-century serial killer on whom Wilde wrote an essay in 1885 titled “Pen, Pencil, and Poison.” Savile also dabbles in pyrotechnics, but his attempted murder is foiled by an accident. Strangely enough, not once does Savile examine the evolution of his motives or the emergence of the proverbial ‘guilty mind.’ Between Savile’s paranoiac repetition and Podgers’ perverse fascination with his own reading, Wilde reveals how when murder comes knocking at our door—no matter whether it is done to us, by us, or before us—this proximity does not result in a denial or rejection of violence, but in an obsession with and persistence of its horror.

Through a striking manifestation of Wildean irony, Savile runs into Podgers on a bridge late one night. Consumed with resentment, Savile topples him off the bridge to his death. His performance of the act of murder liberates him from his persistence to commit murder. His criminal intent to commit murder also ‘dies’ with the creation of the victim, who knew all along that his own art had condemned him. The only residue of this gratuitous crime is the witness Savile, who in Podger’s case, is also the murderer—a snake eating its own tail. Naturally, Savile is never connected with Podger’s death and Wilde depicts his immense relief at having performed the paranoiac ritual and escaped the law. Savile’s journey from obsession with murder to pleasure at its completion mimics that of the reader. Wilde’s reader is also enmeshed in the act of obsessively beckoning the future through an inordinate desire to reach the end of the short story.

The prophecy in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” ties the murderer and victim in a kind of intimate temporal loop where from the moment of reading Savile’s palm, Podgers sets in motion the event of his own death. The same feedback between the murderer and the victim is represented in the 2019 *Netflix* series *Love, Death, Robots* in the episode titled “The Witness.” Although we have traversed a fair distance from Victorian London to a dystopian Hong Kong, the premise remains the same. Through the window of her squalid apartment, a sex worker hears a scream and gunshot across the street. When she draws her curtain, she witnesses the panting figure of a young man covered in blood. This violent event—that Charles Baudelaire would have deemed utterly ordinary for a modern city’s myriad happenings²—is made extraordinary when the man

2 Walter Benjamin observes in his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939) that at the centre

notices that the woman in the window looks exactly like the corpse lying before him. The man sees her and, in that moment, sees himself being *seen*. The sex worker sees him seeing her and realises her precarious status as a murder witness.

One can see inflections of Wildean irony in “The Witness” that makes the seriality of violence in nineteenth-century art, literature, and popular culture particularly prescient of the contemporary moment. The impressionist blue of Hong Kong’s sky and the silver swirls of smog invokes James Whistler’s palette. The episode’s illustrators also create a contrast with the grimy urban expressionism of a Paul Cézanne. The blue wallpaper of the crime scene and fleshy tints of the brothel, where the sex worker tries to hide from her stalker, reflect Cézanne’s aesthetic style of the *manière couillard*.³ The murderer also resembles the Victorian stereotype of the white male psychopath who reduces his female victims to a fetish. The sex worker is forced to flee naked through the streets and her terrified expression reflects the uncanniness we experience in seeing our distorted reflections in the glass of a surveillance camera or the black screen of a television.

Clearly, the murderous sublime invented in nineteenth century Europe endures in the distorted reflections of gratuitous crime in the postmodern mirror. The sex worker’s chase through the city recalls the unheard cries of Jack the Ripper’s victims and the unsolved true crime cases that proliferate today in the form of *Netflix* documentaries, digital micro-fiction, and *Spotify* podcasts. The aesthetic and amoral overtones of the episode also reference the tense entanglement of the three bodies of the victim, accomplice, and murderer in Paul Cézanne’s early impressionist painting *Strangled Woman* from 1872. It represents the mouth of a small dark cave where a man presses his powerful hands upon the throat of a young woman. His accomplice, a strong peasant woman whose face resembles that of a skull, watches on with wry contemplation and does nothing to help the victim.

The ending of “The Witness” is shocking to a spectator who has not read “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime.” The sex worker ends up shooting the murderer in an act of self-defence. This event is then witnessed by the same man across the window and thereby, the pair enter a repetitive cycle of consuming and perpet-

of Baudelaire’s aesthetics lay something called “chockerfahrung” or shock experience. The shock emerged from the fear inhabiting an inherently violent city combined with the dread of revisiting that violence in representation.

3 André Dombrowski’s book *Cézanne, Murder, and Modern Life* (2013) draws attention to Cézanne’s crude and thick brushstrokes and his application of a palette knife to mimic the dagger of the murderer; a technique known as *manière couillard*.

rating violence. In casting the sex worker as a hybrid subject that combines the victim, witness, and murderer all at once, the episode's postmodern representation of serial violence lives up to its title slide. The title slides of *Love, Death, Robots* announce their themes by mimicking the serial animation of objects scrolling in a slot machine. In this episode, the central symbols include an eye and an ouroboros. They indicate the presence of a complicit witness who—like the woman silently watching the murder in Cézanne's painting—neither attempts to escape or rescue the victim, but simply, watches on and on.

What is most disturbing about “The Witness” is the fact that we, as spectators, are asked to reflect upon the persistence with which we consume these serial episodes on *Netflix*. Even as we breeze through the incredibly graphic twelve-minute vignettes of *Love, Death, Robots*, we are made to feel complicit. Much like Podgers cannot tear his eyes away from Savile's palm, the spectator is forced to look at the screen, and see death. Although there is only one numerical victim in “Lord Arthur's Savile's Crime” and “The Witness”—unlike the criminological definition of serial killing as multiple homicide—there is an interesting way in which the very notion of seriality represented in these texts corresponds to our cultural consumption of violence. This is precisely what makes *serial killers* of the subjects we witness in contemporary literature and film. While the visual aspect of serial violence has been widely addressed in narrative criticism, there is little understanding on how its traumatic visibility in popular culture makes *serial spectators* of us all.

1 Redefining the Murderous ‘Sublime’

Although serial killing as a cultural phenomenon and narrative trope is as old as the werewolves and ‘Rippers’ of Anglo-Saxon lore, the term ‘serial killer’ is a fairly recent coinage. Initially, the serial killer was set apart from other acts of killing predominantly by the scale of violence perpetrated. The Victorians invented the criminological term *lustmörd* in 1886 for what is known in common parlance as motiveless murder or psychopathic killings.⁴ With ‘lust

4 The official medico-legal definition of the term came from Richard von Krafft Ebing's book *Psychopathia Sexualis*. First published in 1886, two years prior to the Whitechapel murders, it was an eminent psychological study of sexual deviance and crime. By arguing that murder became the ‘equivalent’ for sex, Krafft-Ebing why Jack the Ripper felt the need to stab a victim thirty-nine times. Where the law had failed to determine the Ripper's motives, Krafft-Ebing created a new category of sexual perversion called *lustmörd* or lust-murder “If potent, the impulse of the sadist is directed to coitus, coupled with preparatory, concomitant or consec-

murder,' the serial killer was fashioned in popular media as a cloaked and shadowy (usually male) figure crouching like a predator over the (usually female) victim with a dripping blade. The best instance of this mythification is the conjuring of the moniker 'Jack the Ripper' to refer to the Whitechapel killer of 1888 who terrorised the streets of London. Even postmodern adaptations of the Ripper and London's dark tourism industry cultivate an aura around the male psychopath precisely by refusing to give him a 'face'—as Madame Tussauds had done in their 1980s exhibit "Jack the Ripper Street."⁵

Some recent conceptualizations of serial killing emphasize its exceptionality, casting the killer in the modality of the popular culture monster. In this narrative, the serial killer is a "throwback" or a "demonic male": a monstrous Mr. Hyde, crawling out of the slime of prehistoric savagery. He (and it is usually a 'he') brings back the dark past of humans. In Vronsky's history of serial killing, for example, he traces the origins of serial killing to an evolutionary struggle between the Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens. In attributing the beginning of civilisation to necrophobia, Vronsky argues that the primary reason serial killing became pathologized was because humans began to fear that the victims would resurrect to wreak vengeance upon the living:

Serial killers don't develop out of nowhere a desire to kill, rape, mutilate, cannibalize, or have sex with the dead; they find it in themselves as an array of deeply embedded primitive instincts which humans are all endowed with at birth but are supposed to be taught in childhood by healthy familial upbringing and positive social norms to suppress. Serial killers are not actually made; those of us who aren't serial killers were unmade as such when we were children, through good parenting, stable family environments, and the sheer luck of not being exposed to some random source of trauma. (Vronsky 2018)

utive maltreatment, even murder, of the consort ("Lust murder"), the latter occurring chiefly because sensual lust has not been satisfied with the consummated coitus" (Krafft-Ebing 2011, 154). Krafft-Ebing's employment of the prefix 'lust' in *lustmörd* was not sexual in origin but intensity.

- 5 Madame Tussaud's 1980 wax exhibit "The Jack the Ripper Street" featured effigies of the murdered prostitutes but the killer himself was an absent presence—"nowhere to be seen"—only a disappearing shadow, whose "signature" was the mutilated body of a woman (Walkowitz 1992, 1). Tussaud's descendants wanted to maintain the authenticity of the Chamber of Horrors and did not give in to popular stereotypes. They used illusionist effects to create the gloomy, sordid atmosphere of Whitechapel but refrained from "invent(ing) a face" for the Ripper even at the risk of "the frequent "surprise" of visitors on failing to find him there" (2).

This ‘biosocial’ definition of serial killing—first propounded in 1876 by the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (Rafter 2009)—focuses on “stranger perpetrated murders” Even today, the consensus on the definition of serial killing seems to be on, “stranger perpetrated murders—usually by men—which often appear motiveless and are characterized by violence” (Muncie and McLaughlin 2001, 259). Further taxonomy distinguishes between “organised” serial killers, like the cold-blooded ‘vampires’ from the Anglo-Saxon mythology Vronsky delves into, and “disorganised” ones like the ‘werewolves’ who were put on trial in medieval France. Experts debate whether the aetiology of serial killing can be traced to an “evil genius,” a “transgressive outsider,” or a vigilante “upholder of social order”? (O’Neill and Seal 2011).

In such criminological definitions, the emphasis is on defining serial killing through the scale of violence perpetrated rather than the desire to repeat violence. What is most disturbing is not what a serial killer does, but that they do it again and again, perhaps conveying that they *know* what they are doing. Biosocial definitions of serial murder in Western criminology tend to erase the presence of the ‘guilty mind’ in the stereotypical male serial killer. Without the presence of guilt, we as spectators are programmed to be more involved in the repetition of the violent act rather than the proceduralism of a criminal investigation based on the motive of the killer. The more bodies the serial killer can produce through the plot of a crime novel, film, or television series, the more the spectator shares in the signifier of persistence rather than condemning its violence.

It must be noted that this nineteenth-century concept of the exceptional male ‘monster’ obscures just how ubiquitous serial killing has become, both in terms of its geographical spread and its popularity as media entertainment. The putative monstrosity of serial killing leads to the conceptualization of a largely Eurocentric murderous sublime. It has become the main aesthetic register of the representation of serial killers in contemporary global popular culture. While not altogether outdated, this traditional concept of the murderous sublime is limiting, both in its theoretical implications and applicability to non-Western cultures and regions. What it misses is precisely the “serial” in serial murder.

The American criminologist Ressler used the term ‘serial killer’ in 1976 (O’Neill and Seal, 101) to refer to murders that unfold in sequence, like the ‘serials’ he watched in the theatres as a child. The etymological heritage of serial killing is deeply connected with the seriality of narrative storytelling that produces pleasure in the spectator. In recent times, there has emerged an equally compelling counter discourse to studying serial killing where the repetition compulsion of violence perpetrated is valued over its scale or excep-

tionality. The cultural conjunction between acts of violence and representations of violence gets established through an overwhelmingly global principle of serial enjoyment. It is a curious admixture of pleasure and horror, attraction and abjection that produces a persistence to kill as well as to witness murder.

Presdee (2000) notes that the persistence to engage with the violent subject relies on the congruence of a “performance of pleasure” in acts of violence, “display of pleasure” in the spectacle of corpses, and “consumption of pleasure” in the West. Serial enjoyment provides the theoretical foundation for our concept of serial spectatorship, as with Presdee’s “carnival of crime”:

To think that crime might in some way be enjoyable to us all is difficult to grapple with and unpleasant to think about. I am not advocating that violence is right, that crime is right, that pleasure at all costs is right, only that we need to think through honestly the connection between culture and crime. We need to countenance the fact that crime and violence erupt out of social processes and come from within social life not from outside of it. By regarding the extremes of our society we put them outside of our consciousness and outside of our thinking. [...] We need a criminology that knows they’re there and has the ability to ‘read’ them, indeed we need to know and want to know why they are marginalised and criminalised in the first place and how the process works. (11)

Instead of centering the entire foundation of a global serial culture on the figure of the Eurocentric male serial killer, in this volume we tried to find new ways to understand and interpret the repetitive desire to read and consume serial violence. Following from a Wildean enquiry raised in “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime,” we are more concerned with why the spectator remains rooted on the crime scene like a murder witness, experiencing both horror and fascination at the same time? Such a specular subject elects to witness violence not for its exceptionality or sublime extraordinariness. Rather, murder is witnessed because it cannot be un-witnessed, as we saw in “The Witness.” The apotropaic gesture does not rescue one being inscribed in a “carnival of crime” where the serial killer is no longer a pathological monster, but someone *like us*.

The traditional emphasis on defining serial killing through the scale of violence perpetrated (sublime) rather than the desire to repeat violence (seriality) relies mostly on Cesare Lombroso’s biological theories of criminology. With an epistemological shift towards temporality, however, we move past Lombrosian discourses of criminality that endure in Western popular culture. To approach serial killing purely based on biology or psychology is necessarily a delimited

individualistic approach that leads to quick carceral solutions rather than long-term holistic reformation. It places us in the role of a taxonomist who fails to categorise where exactly the violence emanates from, and how it is succoured by a global crime culture.

The audience of such serial killer narratives occupies a rather passive relationship to the pain and pleasure we experience during the mass consumption of serial violence, much as Edmund Burke defined the impact of sublime phenomenon on the witness in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757):

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (Burke 1999, 36)

Burke's theory of the sublime dealt with the paradoxical pleasure-pain response that could be produced from horror. This pleasure emerged from the fact that the spectator was at a safe physical distance. It was only if there was no possible chance of the spectator becoming a victim that pleasure from crime and horror could be generated.

Rather than focus on the serial killer as a pathological masculine subject, a monstrous throwback to prehistory, we explore how serial violence is a quintessentially "modern" and global phenomenon, deeply embedded in the dynamics of digital representation, technological reproducibility, repetition, and seriality. Feminist critics have already pointed to the inherent phallocentrism⁶ of the traditional conceptualization of the serial killer. Downing (2013), for instance, successfully deconstructs the masculine exceptionalism of the serial killer by cutting its originary ties with Victorian and Romantic discourses of the sublime. Her genealogical analysis commences with the 'Sadeian subject' from the fiction of the Marquis de Sade to the letters of Lacenaire and Jack the Ripper. But she extends her case studies to contemporary female and queer

6 Phallocentrism is a theoretical term used by scholars of Cultural and Feminist Studies to refer to the centrality of the masculine signifier of the 'phallus' in understanding and creating social relations, gender identity, and diverse cultural meaning. Feminist critics employ it to illustrate how almost all fundamental aspects of Western society are male-centric, male-engendered, male-constituted, and therefore, male-dominated.

serial killers as well, such as Myra Hindley and Aileen Wuornos. Downing also defines serial killing not by the intensity of the act or its essential motivelessness (*acte gratuit*) but rather, by its repetitive nature. Our aim in this volume is to extend Downing's project to include case studies from non-Western and non-Eurocentric popular cultures that deconstruct the phallogentric and biological biases within Western criminology and its definition of serial violence.

2 The Spacetime of Violence

The concept of seriality and its relationship with the traditional parameters of storytelling has become increasingly prominent in the age of sequels, prequels, and remakes. Seriality in narrative is not new: the Victorian practice of publishing novels in instalments, used with great effect by Charles Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle for instance, and the proliferation of weeklies and monthlies created a new way of consuming narrative in which the reader's satisfaction of obtaining a closure was postponed or delayed. Victorian seriality "actively informed a new way of thinking that sought to discover complex relations by tracking changes among distinct elements in temporal succession" (Lerner 2015). This paved the way for episodic storytelling in twentieth-century cinema and television, wherein:

Following a story along from one episode to the next, inviting spectators to reconnect with characters after moments of separation, seriality was already meant to enhance a sense of intimacy, attachment, and spectatorial involvement that popular cinema, followed by television and other audiovisual forms, would continue to cultivate up until today. (Hudelet and Crémieux 2021)

However, the seriality of contemporary electronic media is different from its Victorian predecessors. Frank Kelleter argues that serial narratives today need to be considered as "evolving narratives" because they develop through feedback with their audiences. Moreover, since most serial narratives exist across different media and are often constructed by different agents through recursivity, they can be seen as "self-dynamic cultural agents" (2017) in their own right rather than passive texts as theorized in traditional narratology.

Seriality profoundly reshapes the traditional aspects of narrative: the one-way relationship between the implied author and the implied reader; the unity and coherence of the text; the notion of the narrative closure. Instead, seriality

requires “shifting from texts to series of texts ... from the assertion of originality to phenomena of convergence and negotiation ... and from the textual toward the whole of cultural production” (Hudelet and Cremieux, 5). The most important aspect of seriality—and the most pertinent to representations of violence—is the way in which serial narratives undermine and reshape our collective sense of temporality. Narrative, as Paul Ricoeur (1983–1985) famously argued, is the way through which humanity apprehends the passage of time. Traditional narratives with beginning, middle and end echoed the sense of linear chronological time in the West. Both collective history and individual story were assumed to follow the trajectory of a singular and coherent narrative with a satisfactory closure. Time was structured by what Frank Kermode called “the sense of an ending” (1968): the meaningful resolution of a present crisis in the future. Whether as progress or decadence, utopia or dystopia, the arc of history followed an intelligible and linear plot.

Many factors contributed to the eclipse of the “sense of an ending” in the West: from the collapse of the USSR to the rise of globalism; from the simultaneity of social media to the distraction of multiple entertainment channels. The Covid-19 pandemic and its repeated lockdowns generated the sense of “sticky time”, magnifying what Rushkoff called “presentism” (2013) into a pathology of anxiety and boredom. In the culture of “presentism”, seriality both reinforces and reflects our collective sense of being stuck in the never-ending present. But seriality assumes a particularly sinister aspect when crossed with violence, both as in actual serial killing and in its multimedia representations. If one human act can be said to create an unequivocal ending, it is the act of murder. So why does murder seem to generate so many serial, repetitive, and recycled narratives? How does this seeming clash between form and content in serial narratives of violence impact our collective sense of time? And perhaps most pertinently, what is the relation between the serial consumption of violent narratives and the serial violence of killers?

Are we complicit in the repetitive and ritualistic murders by criminal offenders through our repetitive and ritualistic consumption of their stories? Is there a temporality of serial murder and are we living in it? In one of the first studies of the culture surrounding serial killing, Seltzer (1988) comments on the analogy between serial violence and consumerism, collecting, and other forms of “compulsive repetition” (254) in postmodern culture. But Seltzer’s focus on “wound culture” and on the “spectacle” of violence prevents him from fully considering the narrative implications of serial repetition. Repetition lies at the heart of serial murder. We like to believe that serial killers have their “signature” or invariant formula which underlies their crimes. Criminal profiling relies on discovering the killer’s signature, the supposed template that is repeated in each

individual act of violence.⁷ Whether it is always true or not, serial crime is repetitive by definition.

An analogy to serial violence is the practice of rereading. It may appear presumptuous to compare a passion to commit murder with the innocuous pleasure of reaching for a well-thumbed copy of Stephen King, but there are structural similarities to be examined. In her illuminating book *On Rereading*, Patricia Meyer Spacks suggests that security is one of the main reasons we reread old favorites, feeding our “passion for sameness” (2011). But the security of rereading is not that of reliving the same experience exactly. This is impossible because while the book remains the same, the reader changes. Rather, “reread books offer another kind of reassurance as well: that of remembering our past selves” (4). In other words, rereading is a way to glue together fragments of memory and to revisit the past. Rereading is a form of time travel.

Serial violence, shocking, incomprehensible, and often seemingly motiveless, undermines the coherence of subjectivity. But the same seriality that makes it so inscrutable, functions as a glue to hold together fragments of the perpetrator’s self. The compulsion to repeat, linked by Freud to *thanatos* or the death instinct, can also be seen as pleasurable in itself because it negates the randomness and contingency of the passage of time. Repetition soothes the anxiety of the unpredictable and connects the unfamiliar future with the familiar past. Repetition, in other words, is an alternative principle of narrative coherence. Where linear temporality becomes threatening, chaotic, or “stuck” in the never-ending present, repetition and circularity take over as collective and individual templates to make sense of history. In the chapter on serial killing in *Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject* (2003), the self-narratives of serial killers, whether real or fictional, are deemed as irrevocably fractured, eaten away by the acid of the violent sublime, possessing “a number of irreconcilable stories, bits and pieces pasted together from a pile of random sources” (60).

Narratives of serial violence are a predominant example of what Kelleter calls “self-dynamic cultural agents.” While they exist in many forms, including traditional print books, movies and television series, the most rapidly growing medium for true crime is podcasting. After the stunning success of the true-crime podcast “Serial” in 2015, crime-oriented serial media has exploded. In

7 The reality is more prosaic, even chaotic. Some serial killers do seem to follow a rigid psychic script, but many are opportunistic predators who kill when the circumstances allow. Samuel Little, a prolific serial killer, was a drifter who killed women when he felt he could do it with impunity. He did not even remember the exact number or identities of his victims.

2019, 50 percent of top ten podcasts were true crime (Clausen and Sikjær, 140). True crime podcasts evolve in collaboration between their creators, their audiences, and other agents, such as the law enforcement who are often invited as guests to such podcasts and/or use them to bring life to cold cases. And of course, the perpetrators of the crimes can be seen as macabre ‘auteurs’ whose initial ‘text’ of a corpse is repeatedly narrativized in different ways by different podcasters. In addition to the “vertical” interactions between perpetrators, podcasters and audiences, there is also a “horizontal” ecosystem of true crime as podcasters, writers, and bloggers meet at *Crimecon* and other conventions and refer to each other’s podcasts on air.

True crime creates a participatory culture or what Pierre Levy called “a knowledge space” (1997), in which the boundary between producers and consumers of narratives is erased. Podcast listeners, online sleuths and Facebook true-crime groups cannot be “viewed as passive spectators, but active participants and their behaviors have changed accordingly. Audiences are in complete control of their media consumption, and the traditional dichotomy of creator and audience has been effaced (Allington and Pihlaja 2016). In order for a medium to survive, it must adapt to cater to these changes in behavior” (Clausen and Sikjær, 158). Nevertheless, “knowledge space” is a somewhat sanitized term to describe the avid consumption, exchange, and dissemination of narratives of atrocity. Not all true crime media focuses on serial killing but a significant proportion does. Moreover, ‘true crime’ is a misnomer in the sense that most crimes committed in the real world are crimes against property and non-violent offences. Murders, let alone serial murders, are a tiny minority, and yet without exception, the true-crime knowledge space is dedicated to lethal violence. There are other distortions within this space: focus on female victims as opposed to men, and on whites as opposed to people of color.

But dismissing true crime as “unrealistic” disregards the fact that it creates its own reality. Within the knowledge space of serial narrative production, crime and violence are endlessly recycled, as a limited number of high-profile cases are re-interpreted and retold, circulating between content creators and their highly involved audiences. There is some intersection between this knowledge space and the criminal justice system, as true crime fans take an increasingly active role in solving crimes and/or apprehending criminals.⁸ But the ecosystem of media violence operates according to its own rules. While most true-crime podcasters insist on their veracity, in practice the pressure to tell a good

8 See <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/oct/02/the-rise-of-citizen-sleuths-the-true-buffs-trying-to-solve-cases>

story overrides the adherence to the rules of evidence. The true-crime community generates its own internal knowledge, often in opposition to the legal system.

Despite the stunning success of *Serial*, which promoted the notion that Adnan Syed was innocent of the murder of his high-school girlfriend, he is still in jail, and all his appeals have been denied. Most high-visibility unsolved crimes, such as the Delphi murders, have unofficial “solutions”, which are widely accepted within the true-crime community but do not translate into any kind of legal action. This undermines the public trust in the legal system, which is now seen as deficient compared to the narrative satisfaction of true crime. Moreover, traditional narratives, both literary and cinematic, have begun to imitate the dynamics of the true-crime media ecosystem, thus further eroding the boundary between real-life violence and its fictional representation. The *Six Stories* series of novels by Matt Wesolowski (2016–2021), for example, has a podcaster as its protagonist and each novel is structured as a season of a true-crime podcast, despite the fact that the crimes in question not only never occurred but could not have occurred, involving as they do vampires and other assorted monsters.

True-crime podcasts operate in two different regimes of temporality. On the one hand, there is the linear timeline of each murder, leading up to the closure through the solution of the crime. And then there is the circular repetitive format of the medium itself, with its insatiable desire for revisiting old or cold cases. The distinction between story time and discourse time in classical narratology may be useful here. According to Genette (1983), “story time” are the events in the chronological order; discourse time is the way in which these events are represented in the text through the manipulation of their order and/or duration. While the story time of true crime is linear and progressive, their discourse time is built on repetition. This is precisely how serial killers structure their inner narratives. Each act of murder is irreversible and unique; but the ritualistic repetition tends to blur all of them into the same static tableau. Serial killers thus inhabit a space of violence parallel to the space of knowledge of serial culture.

3 The Evil of Banality

What is the moral status of the serial consumer of true crime? Are we complicit in the murders committed by offenders simply through our act of bearing witness? And since the boundary between truth and fiction is becoming increasingly porous via transmedia adaptations of serial killing, should not the

same ethical question be raised in relation to all representations of violence? In her book about the philosophy of serial killing, S. Waller (2010) argues that we watch the actions of mass murderers from within “a protective frame” of representational and sometimes cognitive distancing (5). Other contributors to Waller’s anthology raise the issue of complicity and evil, with many contending that distancing is precisely what allows serial killers to commit their crimes.

It is not, as is often claimed, that murderers are devoid of empathy—some are but certainly not all; nor are all serial killers sociopathic. Rather, they manage to erect a “protective frame” around their interactions with their victims, dehumanizing them into objects or developing some form of self-justification, often quite elaborate. Ian Brady, one of the Moor murderers, wrote an entire book in which he explained his killings by references to Sade and Nietzsche. No matter what we think of Brady as a philosopher, there is an obvious moral discomfort in finding ourselves on the same page, so to speak, with a child murderer. Perpetrators and spectators inhabit the same epistemological and narrative space, which is the space of violence.

And yet, the notion that there is a direct correlation between representation and action has been repeatedly debunked. There has been no perceptible increase in serial murder despite the staggering rise in the popularity of serial murder movies, television series, and novels in the last twenty years. The explosion of true crime podcasts hardly moved a needle on true (that is, actual) crime. Fluctuations in crime statistics has been fiercely debated by sociologists and criminologists but few would argue that they are the product of the media. Rather than a causal relation, it seems that violent representation and actual violence converge on their ubiquity. While violent crime statistics differ from country to country, crime itself is present in every human society. And with the growth of the media ecosphere of violence, it has penetrated everyday life to an extent unparalleled in previous eras. Violence, especially serial violence, has become banal.

The passage from Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) about the banality of evil has been bandied about but often misunderstood. It is worth quoting it in full here:

Evil comes from a failure to think. It defies thought for as soon as thought tries to engage itself with evil and examine the premises and principles from which it originates, it is frustrated because it finds nothing there. That is the banality of evil Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been farther from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain.’ Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all ...

He merely, to put the matter colloquially, never realized what he was doing ... It was sheer thoughtlessness—something by no means identical with stupidity—that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period. (86)

However, this is a profound misunderstanding of Eichmann. His diaries, discovered after the trial, prove conclusively that he was neither a blinkered bureaucrat nor a mindless bean-counter. He knew exactly what he was doing, and he believed that what he was doing was right, thereby indicating the presence of intent. Eichmann was an ideologue who sent millions to their death because he had embraced the “premises and principles” of Nazism that claimed Jews were not human beings. Even calling him a “criminal” is a misnomer. He did not break the law; he embraced the new law in which killing was a sacrifice on behalf of the Aryan race. He was certainly evil; and he was certainly very far from banal (Gomel 2003).

But Eichmann is no Ted Bundy. It is safe to assume that in the alternative universe in which Adolf Hitler was never born Adolf Eichmann would not kill anybody. There is some evidence that he was put off by witnessing the physical violence of executions. The psychology, actions, and social role of ideological killers, those who murder for the sake of a political or religious cause, are very different from common-or-garden criminals. So perhaps Arendt was simply mistaken in her diagnosis of the banality of evil by applying it to a wrong category of malefactors. Can we, perhaps, consider “ordinary” serial killers and other murderers in the light of Arendt’s paradigm?

In her book *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt argues that violence is an inescapable aspect of humanity, since “element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication” (139). She juxtaposes violence and power, the latter being the structure of social relations that binds communities through the imposition of laws and rules. “But while violence can destroy power, it can never become a substitute for it” (202). In other words, physical violence is both ubiquitous and impotent since it can erode social bonds but not enforce them. Crime is everywhere, flourishing in the nooks and crannies of power, never to be defeated but never to triumph either. Crime is banal.

A discerning reader will note the shift from “violence” to “crime”. The two are not synonymous, of course. But our goal in this volume here is to narrow the expanding definitions of violence (including my own), which blur the boundary between violence and power, and between “purposeless” killing and instrumentality of war. In *A Hermeneutic of Violence* (2019), for example, Mark M. Ayyash suggests a kind of inquiry that foregrounds violence as “‘the thing itself’ ... and brings to the forefront of the analysis the question of the

(un)knowability of violence" (18). The "thing itself" is the violent sublime which inheres in any deployment of physical force against others. But while this is an important and significant aspect of violence, it risks collapsing all legal, social, and ultimately ethical distinctions.

A hermeneutics of violence cannot distinguish between a just war and an invasion; between resistance and terrorism; between genocide and serial murder. And most importantly, for the purposes of this volume, it cannot offer any insight into the interaction between serialized digital media and serial crime, which, by definition, excludes instrumental political violence. In discussing the concept of the banality of evil, Elizabeth Minnich (2016) suggests that what enables violence is a sort of inattentiveness or inability to understand oneself or others without the help of verbal clichés. She calls it "conceptual banality" and compares it to the kudzu plant that stifles everything under its uniform cover (39). Discussing Eichmann's behavior during his trial, Minnich writes that he appeared to be "unable to relate to the world attentively, to think at all as if 'without a banister'" (38).

In other words, perpetrators of violence are prisoners of collective narratives, seeing the mangled bodies of their victims through the comforting filter of language. Again, it is less important whether this is an accurate representation of Eichmann or the genocidaires in Rwanda (we would argue it is not) but rather, it offers an interesting counterpoint to the notion of the violent sublime, "the thing itself". Regardless of its presence in every act of violence, specific kinds of murder can become so enmeshed in the circulation of narratives that they lose their ability to shock or horrify. They become routine, almost comforting in their familiarity. They become banal.

It is not accidental that the popularity of serial killing as entertainment exploded during the time of the pandemic. One of the strangest aspects of Covid-19 as compared to the pandemics of the past is its erasure of the body in pain, and of the collective experience of *catharsis* that came with it. If representations of the Black Death, smallpox or typhus obsessively harp on the images of corpses piling up on the streets or the sick squeezed together in the overflowing lazarettes and hospitals, the last two years saw us huddling alone in front of the computer screen, floating in the incorporeal limbo of Zoom meetings and video chats. Isolation has been one of the main consequences of the pandemic (Hwang et al 2020) And another one has been an explosion in the popularity of true-crime podcasts and shows.⁹

9 See <https://www.thedailybeast.com/as-coronavirus-rages-true-crime-tv-shows-provide-a-strange-and-popular-comfort>

In the crushing boredom of lockdowns, serial murder was no longer a source of “the sublime sense of power” experienced vicariously through identification with the killer (Gomel 2003). It was just part of the endless and shapeless routine of pandemic time; something you listened to, or binged on, every day. It has become ordinary, even boring. It has become banal. The space of violence inhabited by the true-crime community and by consumers of serial murder narratives is an alternative to the broken time of Covid-19, and climate change. It does not provide the Aristotelian *catharsis* of a closure or a resolution; nor does it satisfy the sense of an ending. But in a situation in which the apocalypse is always coming but never actually arrives, (re)reading the same apocalyptic narrative over and over again offers at least an illusion of mastery.

4 Towards Transnationalism and Transmediality

Serial killing has become a global phenomenon, both in terms of its ubiquity and representational salience. While previously considered to be an almost exclusively Eurocentric or Anglo-American type of crime that burgeoned at the end of the nineteenth century, the global notoriety of serial killers from China, Japan, India, the Middle East, as well as antipodean case studies from Scandinavia and New Zealand, have shown that serial violence is truly universal. At the same time, the mass cultural popularity of novels, films, video games, podcasts, and television shows on serial murder has risen dramatically across regions through a kind of transnational digital spectatorship in the twenty-first century. While there have been several critical explorations of serial killing both as a socio-cultural aberration and form of mass entertainment (Presdee 2000, Pezotti 2015), we are yet to see a dedicated study of serial murder as a transnational, transcultural, and transmedia phenomenon. The recent edition of the *Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Allan et al. 2020) makes excellent progress in this direction, with key words like “seriality,” “mobility,” “transnationality,” and “hybridity” grounding some of its main approaches.

With the advent of globalization and the production of a global digital spectatorship, Western discourses of serial killing have undergone radical ontological and narrative transformations that require critical examination. As serial violence spreads across new medias from *Netflix* to true crime podcasts, dark tourism to neo-fascist trolls on the internet, the very concept of the Romantic sublime has been replaced by the evil of banality. To paraphrase Michel Foucault (1978), the Victorians are no longer ‘Other’ but a manifestation of us. We live in a post-historical age pervaded by very real ‘Arthur Saviles’ and endlessly reimagined ‘Jack the Rippers.’ This volume not only attests to the hybridity

of global narratives of serial killing but provides new theoretical frameworks to specifically analyse serial spectatorship from a transnational and transmedia perspective. Admittedly, the *Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction* signals the importance of taking a transnational approach to study crime fiction and explores the role of cultural hybridity and mobility in revising the Eurocentric canon of killers and detectives. However, Allan et al. note in their introduction that:

While the increased translation, circulation and consumption of crime fiction is to be applauded, the internationalisation of the genre has led to further restrictive or reductive categorisations being imposed on the genre. Indeed, as we will show below, at the very moment in which the genre opens up to its multicultural multiplicity, it becomes reduced to an exclusively Western model. Moreover, despite the internationalisation, individual crime novels are again reduced, this time to the discrete national context in which they are produced. Both of these limitations on the genre emerge paradoxically through the most recent manifestation of World Literature Studies. (2020)

By focusing on serial killer narratives as a predominant sub-genre of global crime fiction, as well as moving away from the subject of the serial killer to the issue of serial consumption, our volume seeks to redress the problem of this persistent Eurocentrism. The chapters in this volume are by no means a simple aggregate of national case studies, or a region-based pastiche of horror. They are connected through the rigorous conceptualisation of a serial spectator that is distinguished from other forms of aesthetic consumption in crime narratives by dint of a *persistent* and *complicit* witnessing. By covering a range of texts from literature, art, film, and television, the chapters shore up a more expansive and relatively global version of what Seltzer called America's "wound culture." They discuss how different forms of textual, visual, and media representations of serial violence impact our understanding of the serial killer as a violent subject in the 21st century. Through the discursive construction of a global serial spectatorship—where cultural mobility is determined by those who consume violence across the globe—our contributors pose the question whether there exists a feedback loop not only between the murderer and the witness, but also between murder itself and mass entertainment.

In this volume, we ask why this particular crime—serial killing—resonates in so many different regions and cultures. Is it truly 'universal' in terms of a standard of representation or does it represent the paradox of a 'singular uni-

versal'? Feminist cultural theorists such as Gayatri Spivak and Naomi Schor have offered a theoretical solution to the old universalist way of approaching cultural phenomena (like serial killing) that, despite their ubiquity, remain overdetermined with predominantly Western signifiers:

In this way the universal would always already have a two-tiered structure: universal/diverse, that then undertakes a constant circular revolution that could be summarized in the following terms: difference, formerly excluded from the patriarchal/ethnocentric universal is subsequently liberated and thereby incorporated into a singularization of the universal on feminist terms. This new, improved universal then leads to an ordering of a political subject who is a body that determines. What we have in short is the universalization of the singular. (Scott 2006)

This push towards the universal singularity of serial killing begs the question, are there specific national forms of serial killing and thus, context-specific narrative ways of transforming it into a commodity for mass aesthetic consumption? It is no longer enough to seek its origins in the Romantic and Eurocentric 'sublime' of Wilde, Baudelaire, and De Quincey (Black 1991, Downing 2003, Binik 2020), or to think of the complicity of the witness as being solely descended from the cult cinema of Alfred Hitchcock and David Lynch (Seltzer 1998, San Juan and McDevitt 2013, Jenner 2013). We need to consider what serial killing means in the context of global popular culture where transcultural and transmedia popularity defy the persistence of Anglocentrism.

Our volume departs from existing scholarship on serial killers by adopting a mixed-methods approach that combines theories from Cultural Criminology, Film Studies, Narrative Studies, and Cultural Studies. This is to avoid creating a homogenous or hegemonic category of the serial spectator that presumably pervades global culture. Topographically, we chose to diverge from the Anglocentricism of edited volumes on serial violence (O'Neill and Seal 2012, Sandhoff and Hedenborg-White 2014, Pezzotti et al. 2015). The chapters in this volume deal with serial killing as experienced in diverse cultures, with case studies from the US as well as India, China, Japan, and Korea, to name a few. It establishes the difference between narratives of the murderous sublime that somewhat persist in the Global North versus narratives that showcase the banality of serial murder in the Global South. Global in scope, and containing research from academics across the world, the book addresses important issues that have been overlooked or under-developed by contributions that centre on Western popular culture. To that extent, our volume is comparable to recently published volumes like Nilsson et al. 2017 and Piipponen et al. 2020

that are designed to acknowledge cultural mobilities between regional narratives of crime and serial violence.

In their volume *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, Nilsson et al. deconstruct the Eurocentric literary 'centre' of the genre by recognising the role of translation, dissemination, adaptation, and market politics in constructing a global spectatorship of violence. They employ Pascale Casanova's concept of the 'World Republic of Letters' and Franco Moretti's deconstruction of the binary between the literature of the Global North and South. By showing how Sherlock Holmes has been adapted in China, Tibet, and Moscow in the section "Holmes Away from Home," they reveal the (sometimes violent) politics of canonization. Indigenous or 'local' detectives from the Global South are often translated to English, thereby suppressing the vernacular. At the same time, there is a resistance to acknowledge non-English rewritings of the canonical detective or find origins of the genre in the ancient literature of the Tang Dynasty or plays of Kalidasa:

Traditionally the focus of studies in comparative and world literature studies has been on a Western classical canon, but over the past fifteen years the field of world literature has rapidly expanded to include much more of the world's literatures. By exploring the genre of crime fiction, we want to show the value of not dividing literature into watertight categories of high and low art and culture. The most ambitious crime novels occupy a space in between both categories or even participate in both, varying according to time, place, and readership. Even the most purely popular crime fiction shares important features with elite works of world literature, especially the characteristic of combining universal themes with local settings. At once highly stylized and intensely localized, crime fiction is a pre-eminently "glocal" mode of literary creation and circulation. (2017)

The term "glocal"—that often addresses some of the concerns of the "singular universal" in world crime fiction—merits critical reassessment through serial killer narratives. After all, as the contemporary Mexican filmmaker Guillermo del Toro claims of the Korean director Bong Joon Ho's 2003 masterpiece *Memories of Murder*, "There is for me, a kinship with Bong at many levels in this desire to take what would be a genre piece and put it through the prism of a concrete historical social context that changes the way the piece can be read. Because it is not just something that happens somewhere" (Toro 2003).

Therefore, in organising crime fiction as a transnational cultural phenomenon, it is important to focus on issues of cultural kinship between various

artists, writers, and filmmakers, as well as the consequent cultural mobility between texts and contexts. Piipponen et al. 2020 thus selects various case studies from regional and glocal crime fiction in their volume *Transnational Crime Fiction: Mobility, Borders, and Detection* (2020). Where our volume emphasises spectatorship as the theoretical locus to understand the specific subgenre of serial killing, *Transnational Crime Fiction* works within the framework of “mobilities research.” Piipponen et al. 2020 select case studies that deal with crimes of borders and migration, “both concrete and abstract senses: mobility can refer to the traffic and flow of people, goods, capital and information; to embodied experiences of mobility; or to the mobility of ideas, texts, images, affects and ideologies.” These questions of affect and the translation of embodied experience become even more pertinent with respect to serial killer narratives. By simultaneously narrowing the research focus to serial killers and broadening the parameters to include transmedia case studies—rather than literary fiction alone—we hope to expand on Piipponen et al.’s claim that crime is glocal because it is invariably adaptable and translatable.

5 Structuring Serial Killing

With our radical emphasis on narratology and reception, as well as the transnational nature of serial killing, this volume is divided into four thematic parts. The contributions in each part, while providing theoretical insights that are discrete and particular to the temporal and cultural context they examine, relate significantly to the overarching theme of serial spectatorship and persistent witnessing. Our contributors hail from diverse nations and scholarly backgrounds, thereby actively engaging with the challenge of analysing a cultural phenomenon defined by its universal singularity, as well as its banality. Overall, they eschew or deconstruct nineteenth-century notions of the white ‘masculine’ serial killer in favour of the mass contemporary appeal of seriality and repetition. The methodological bent of the contributions ranges from textual analysis, discourse analysis, and narratology to historical and cultural studies. The definition of the serial killer is consistent for most part, based on a combination of biosocial and psychoanalytic notions within dominant criminology of a violent subject suffering from repetition compulsion, perversion, and the will to power.

The primary texts under examination in these timely and important studies of serial killing vary from novels and films to graphic fiction, newspapers and mainstream media, and internet literature. Although the anthology lacks a chapter dedicated to the global popularity of true crime podcasts, the role

of digital media in perpetrating a mass culture of crime is addressed in various contributions. In Presdee's words, in order to fully grasp the ethical and aesthetic ramifications of this "carnival of crime" we inhabit, "we need a criminology that can comment on *how culture kills*" (Italics added) (11). The gamification of true crime in gaming apps and devices, such as *Watchdogs 2* that allows the player to chase the infamous Zodiac Killer, or the pixelated Scissorman who appears out of corners to attack the player in *Clock Tower* in an uncanny subversion of the monsters in arcade games like *Pacman*, is also a burgeoning genre that merits critical attention. True crime documentaries on *Netflix* India like *Delhi Crime*, *House of Secrets: The Burari Deaths*, and *Crime Stories: India Detectives* mushroomed during the Covid-19 pandemic to almost rival the surge of procedural drama in America. While it is impossible to have an anthology on serial killing that can address its myriad and complex manifestations across all media and cultures, there is a concerted attempt in this volume to destabilize the Anglo-American and Eurocentric canon of serial killer fiction. Case studies range from the expected Jack the Ripper or Hannibal Lecter to the more obscure serial killer Lee Chun-jae, on whom Bong Joon Ho based his film *Memories of Murder*, or the infamous Mumbai-based Sindhi Talwai featured in *Raman Raghav 2*.

The first part is titled 'Seriality of Violence' to draw attention to the predominant theme of repetition, temporality, and performance in popular representations of serial killing. The chapters contain case studies from American and Japanese popular culture that satirize the repetitive, paranoiac, and excessive consumption of modern consumerism through a heavily aestheticized metaphor of gore. Chapter 1 "*Abattoir Elegantarium: Fashion Victimology and Hannibal's Grand Designs*" examines the grotesquerie of Bryan Fuller's 2013 television series *Hannibal*. The protagonist Hannibal Lecter is represented as a Petronian *arbiter elegantiarum* and embodies a particularly violent aesthetic. The chapter dissects the *mise-en-scène*—as it relates to production design, wardrobe, and the uses and meanings of color—to reveal a "splazzatura" effect that aestheticizes the horrors *Hannibal* serves up. In the process, the chapter demonstrates how this provocative series situates the spectator in the uncomfortably comfortable position of vicariously enjoying its onscreen depredations, as much an accomplice as a witness.

Chapter 2 titled "Eat, Sleep, Read, Repeat: Excess and Enjoyment in *Tomie*" focuses on Junji Ito's popular Japanese horror manga series which narrates the story of Tomie, a schoolgirl who gets murdered brutally and repetitively. Her body and disembodied organs then resurrect in mysterious ways to regenerate and replicate endlessly. The same narrative is repeated in the comic series under different settings and circumstances, but this violence is precisely what

draws the reader over and over again towards the formula. In the case of *Tomie*, the issue of persistent witnessing is problematized by the misogynistic grotesquerie with which the heroine is killed and the abject monstrosity and attraction of her resurrecting body. This chapter uses Marxist and Psychoanalytic theories to connect the Lacanian concept of enjoyment with the pleasurable repetition of modern consumer capitalism. Within the endless circuit of returning to the same, predictable formula in this series, the reader's desire for pleasure becomes an object of fetish as unattainable as Tomie herself.

Chapter 3 employs recent cognitive approaches to Narrative Studies to show the embodied, enactive, and emotional nature of reading literature. This provides the basis paradoxically for the reader's pleasure in engaging with a narrative of violence, as well as personal distress. "Caught in Observation: Sublime *tableaux morts* in Female Serial Killer Narratives" reveals how queer serial killer fiction like Chelsea G. Summers' 2020 novel *A Certain Hunger* and television series *Killing Eve* (2018–2020) pointedly reflect on the interplay of delight and distress that comes with being a serial spectator. It addresses the ways in which the serial killer justifies her 'motive' to kill by simply narrativizing a desire to commit murder, much like Wilde's hero Arthur Savile. The chapter argues that the persistent cultural attraction of such narratives lies in their potential to allow the reader/spectator to experience the dynamics of being an 'entangled observer' through both distant observation and visceral involvement.

The next part titled "Moral Panics and Murderous Poetics" introduces case studies from Victorian England to contemporary New Zealand and Europe that in one way or another grapple with and re-invent the Romantic discourse of the murderous sublime. The focus is on how audiences have imagined and re-imagined murder from sensationalist, Eurocentric, and phallogocentric perspectives that have remained residual in global popular culture since the nineteenth century. The role of society in both consuming and by so doing, regenerating the discourse of the serial killer as a pathological 'male' subject is examined. To that extent, the relationship between serial killers, their representations in the popular media, and the moral panics that consequently ensue is worth interrogating. As per the criminological definition, "A moral panic entails simplification, stigmatization and heightened public feeling about an individual, group, or event. Calling this a moral panic draws attention to exaggerated and distorted media coverage and the ways in which it may be seen as symbolizing diffuse social anxieties in particular conjunctures" (Muncie and McLaughlin 2001, 176).

Chapter 4 titled "'Horror in Whitechapel': Sensational Journalism in the Jack the Ripper Murders" conducts a close reading and discourse analysis of newspaper accounts of the Whitechapel Murders of 1888, particularly *The Star*, *Illus-*

trated Police News, London Times. The media spectacle generated around 'Jack the Ripper' not only served various political and social agendas but spawned new crime genres and English culture's enduring intrigue with the prototype of the 'Sadeian subject.' Through new narratological strategies, the Victorian Press spun a timeless whodunnit that fascinates audiences to this day. The chapter reveals how this comfortable fetishization of the corpses of the murdered prostitutes proliferated due to three crucial trends: a growth in literacy and classes who had access to written texts, the emergence of sensational or "yellow" journalism, and the widespread distribution of popular broadsides. This was, of course, achieved at the cost of erasing the specific histories and 'faces' of the murder victims.

Through the lens of a feminist cultural criminology, Chapter 5 titled "(Wo)-Mens Rea: The Strange Case of Anne Perry and Murder of/for/by Women" deconstructs the phallocentrism of the Anglo-Saxon legal concept of *mens rea*. The female murderer constituted a gendered paradox in Victorian criminology and medico-legal representations of the 'guilty mind.' Therefore, this chapter explores the life and writing of Anne Perry who was convicted of murdering Honorah Parker in 1954 at Christchurch, New Zealand. This gruesome murder, perpetrated by two teenage girls, rocked the foundation of 'civilized' settler values in the Antipodes. Demonstrating the gratuitous repetition of a serial killer, writers and directors like Angela Carter, Frances Walsh and Peter Jackson, Joel Seria, Peter Graham, and Joanne Drayton have adapted Perry's life again and again into a sensational story of matricide and queerness. At the heart of each adaptation, as well as this chapter, is a theoretical struggle to reconcile Hulme's 'intent' to commit the act of murder with Perry's 'motive' to produce more and more corpses in fiction.

The final chapter in this part "A Poetics of Restlessness: *The House that Jack Built* and Conventions of Serial Killer Fiction" focuses on the negative reaction that the Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier received for his film at the 71st Cannes Festival. It argues that the audience's need to walk out of the theatre in this case was not only a moral reaction to the gratuitous violence represented on screen, but also an aesthetic one. The film placed the spectator in such proximity to gore that it was almost an act as violent and transgressive as that of the killer on screen. This 'poetics of restlessness' no doubt correlates to the spectator's persistence to experience the cinematic genre of serial murder.

The third part of the anthology "Transnational Evil of Banality" is important in two main respects. First, it uses a postcolonial approach to destabilize the Anglo-American and Eurocentric canon of serial killing as a sublime, exceptional, or radically evil act of violence. It accomplishes this by focusing on

how, beyond the borders of Victorian and post-Victorian criminology, serial killing is mostly understood as just another type of violence that emerges from spaces of inequality and power struggle like the modern city. In other words, it inverts Arendt's equation of the "banality of evil" that was exhibited during the Nazi Holocaust for a conception of evil itself as being banal, particularly as it is enacted in Non-Western societies and cultures. By invoking the theoretical problem of the 'singular universal,' this part asks how serial killing can be universal if it is indeed so exceptional? Why does this particular kind of violence resonate in so many different cultural settings? Are there specific national forms of serial killing and its representation as either being sublime or utterly ordinary?

Chapter 7 titled "Murder and Meaning: The Ordinariness of Violence in *Memories of Murder*" explores how Bong Joon Ho's 2003 film *Memories of Murder*, while indulging the audience's fantasies of extraordinary violence, ultimately exposes the utter ordinariness of violence and its unsettling presence in our everyday life. Set in the Hwaseong serial murders of the late 1980s, the film shows the disorder and corruption inherent in South Korea's police force and political institutions during this period. Not only did the event serve as a symbol of political turmoil in late 1980s Korea, but the police's desperate search for the killer questions the connection between violence and meaning. Can a killer be known simply by looking at their face as Lombrosian criminology would have us believe? A clear dichotomy emerges, in Bong's storytelling and imagery, between the ordinary and the extraordinary—the everyday and the sublime.

The next chapter "Lurid and Unlimited: Interpreting Bateman's Banality in *American Psycho*" compares the banality of violence in Bret Easton Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho* with the more gratuitous 2001 cinematic adaptation. It examines whether rendering the protagonist Patrick Bateman less "terrifyingly normal" makes his violence more alien. When a killer is exactly as run-of-the-mill as we are, as Bateman is represented in the novel, we are forced to grapple with our own proximity to the horror they create, to our own complicity. Sensationalizing the violence of *American Psycho*, however, distracts us from the banality of evil that Arendt warned about. The chapter questions if the film's shocking allure is a kind of aesthetic 'salve'? On what terms does it reassure the audience that we are fundamentally unlike the murderers whose exploits we follow?

In Chapter 9 "The Digital Banal and Sublime Justice in Chinese Internet Literature" the serialized production and consumption of the *Death Notice* web series by Zhou Haohui is examined in depth. The series revolves around the serial killer Eumenides who announces his victims in a "death notice". Chinese

digital fiction allows sequential installments of a continuous narrative to be periodically consumed by an online readership. Due to the mind-numbing repetition of violence, serial murder becomes a suitable subject for the serial narratives of Internet literature. This chapter questions whether the brutality of serial killing is diluted by this very technological reproducibility? Or does the diegetic world-building in *Death Notice* aspire to an alternate social scenario centered on the sublime object of extralegal justice?

Another crucial way in which this volume differs from any previous study of serial violence is through particular attention to the basic narrative constituents of its representation: time and space. The criminology of serial murder is focused on its temporal aspect (seriality and repetition) and often on the space in which the murderer operates, as reflected in the concept of geographical profiling (Canter 2007). But there is little study of how time and space intersect in serial representations of violence, despite the obvious centrality of this issue. This volume is meant to fill this lacuna, especially in its final part “Spacetime of Violence.” Chapter 10 titled ““Blood on the Snow”: Nordic Noir as a Fantasy Travelog” focuses on the paradox of the popular serial killer genre of Nordic Noir. While Iceland and the Scandinavian countries have very low crime rates, Nordic Noir offers exceedingly violent and baroque representations of serial killing, abduction, and torture. This chapter situates Nordic Noir in the context of what Peter Davidson called “the idea of the North”: the way in which the far North and the Arctic are conflated with the category of the sublime. The North becomes the exotic ‘Other’ of Europe; a repository of its discarded histories and repressed folk religions. By analyzing novels by the Icelandic writer Yrsa Sigurdardottir and the Swedish writer Lars Kepler, the chapter explores an alternative poetics of spectatorship which combines travelog, folk horror, and a serial-killer aesthetics. It also asks whether there exists a ‘Global North’ as an imaginary counterpoint of the Global South?

Chapter 11 titled ““Le immagini ti guardano”: The Gallery City in the Giallo Films of Dario Argento” conducts an in-depth study of the Italian cinematic subgenre of the *giallo*—hybrid murder mystery/horror films popular from the 1960s to the 1980s and forerunners of the American “slasher” movie. These films notably makes use of two archetypes: the serial killer and the witness. This chapter examines the encounter between these figures by considering aesthetic strategies employed by the Italian filmmaker Dario Argento in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970) and *Deep Red* (1975). Specifically, it argues how Argento transforms the urban space of the city into a gallery city, in which viewing subject/viewed object dynamics are thrown into stark relief through strategies of estrangement. It situates Argento within an urban aesthetics of alienation pioneered by Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allen Poe,

and in relation to theories of space and cinema propounded by Paul Virilio, Laura Mulvey, and Jean Baudrillard.

The final chapter of the anthology concludes with a case study from contemporary Bollywood. Chapter 12 titled “*Santushti* and *Jodidar* through Serial Killing in *Raman Raghav*” studies Anurag Kashyap’s popular 2016 thriller *Raman Raghav 2.0* that was based on the notorious Mumbai-based serial killer Sindhi Talwai. It examines how the spectator is straddled uncomfortably between the two killers Ramanna and Raghav, negotiating their gaze and narrative voices. If killing is a performative act, requiring the gaze of another killer, this chapter poses the question how do we understand this empathetic spectatorship? The film explores the concept of *santushti* to describe the pleasure that a serial-killer derives by seeing another kill, either as a voyeur or patriarch, waiting to bestow his craftsmanship to another companion or *jodidar*. This chapter examines the affective relationship between two serial killers to explore how we understand this kind of desire that relies on a slow implosion of narrative (in)coherence.

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PART 1

Seriality of Violence



Abattoir Elegantiarum: Fashion Victimology and *Hannibal*'s Grand Designs

Seth Wilder

This chapter's title plays on words that combine concepts neither frequently nor readily conjoined, an attribute it shares with the television series under consideration. First, "abattoir" is taken from the French verb "to fell" and describes a slaughterhouse.¹ The second part of the phrase, "elegantiarum," is a Latin term that connotes elegance.² In Latin, this term is typically seen in combination with the word "arbiter." The phrase stretches back to the court of Rome's Emperor Nero, where Gaius Petronius Arbiter served as the "arbiter elegantiarum," the foremost authority on etiquette, fashion, and manner. In Bryan Fuller's television series *Hannibal* (2013–2015), the homonymous character occupies a similar role, albeit most unwelcome in the surrounding community and with darker, more nefarious designs.

A reimagining of characters and situations from Thomas Harris' novels and the cinematic adaptations based thereon, the television series embodies a violent aesthetic. Much of its grotesquery revolves around its rendition of the titular protagonist. Elevated here from supporting character in Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon* novels to a central role, Lecter is an 'evil' arbiter as preoccupied with his sense of style and manners as his twisted desires. Careful dissection of the series' *mise-en-scène* as it relates to Lecter's wardrobe, its production design, and the use of colour reveals deliberate strategies that externalise its central character's disturbed and disturbing inner workings. The series presents a *scalpelgliatura*, aestheticizing the violent horrors Hannibal serves up. As the culinary cannibal's Bible-black fantasies surge to unsavoury life, the series fashions an *abattoir elegantiarum*—a charnel house rendered with impeccable taste, the bespoke mixing with the unspeakable. By revelling in its depredations and grotesquery, *Hannibal* updates the work of the nineteenth-century Decadents for the twenty-first century. Here, in place of those earlier artistic

1 abattoir (n.): "slaughterhouse for cows," 1820, from French *abattre* "to beat down, knock down, slaughter" (abate) + suffix *-oir*, corresponding to Latin *-orium*, indicating "place where".

2 Elegantiarum (n.): With arbiter, an authority on taste, etiquette and propriety. From the Latin *elegantia*, "taste, propriety, refinement".

responses to the progress narrative undergirding the Imperialist capitalist project of *fin-de-siècle* Europe, the series offers a dark response to the consumerist excesses of late capitalism in the form of a cannibalistic serial killer with a refined palate. In the process, the text produces a pungent aesthetic system that reveals blood red as the new black, situating the viewer in the uncomfortably comfortable position of vicariously enjoying its onscreen depredations, as much an accomplice as a witness.

What follows is an attempt to deconstruct *Hannibal's* abattoir elegantiarum, meticulously assembled over the course of the series, examining the various ingredients that constitute its recipe. At the base is a consideration of the series as an adaptation existing within a broader intertext that includes Thomas Harris' novels and their prior film adaptations. Rather than treated as faithful or faithless to its source materials, Fuller's series is revealed as something akin to the discursive play of fan fiction described by scholars such as Anne Kustritz (2003) as slash/fiction. Furthermore, as with slash/fiction generally, its take is rooted in queerness. Although it includes consideration of how the series upends sexual heteronormativity in foregrounding the homoerotic dimensions relationship between its main characters, approaching the series from this perspective reveals a text much more comprehensively and fundamentally queer—as Sean Donovan (2016) and Ellie Lewerenz (2019) suggest, one designed in its queerness to challenge the stable binaries at the heart of the police procedural genre and Thomas Harris' novels, respectively.

The analysis then shifts to consider how the series' aesthetic systems co-structure and produce the abattoir. Upon closer look, Hannibal Lecter's bespoke wardrobe and the broader concepts of sprezzatura and decadence expose an interrogation of the potential for the nexus between fashion and violence articulated by Elana Gomel (2011) in her look at Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho*. Lecter is revealed as a malevolent, twenty-first-century dandy, sharing a spiritual kinship with the late nineteenth-century Decadents. This relationship is most strikingly observed between Lecter and Irish author Oscar Wilde, whose work unites the otherwise often disparate theoretical work of Donovan, Gomel, and John Dollimore (2018) in this chapter. Following that, a section explores the series' production design, especially its *Grand Guignol* murders and how their simultaneously grotesque and visually captivating ambivalence further implicates the viewer in Hannibal's sublime violence. Finally, since blood factors so heavily in the series, the aesthetic analysis concludes with Julia Kristeva's ideas on colour (1980; 1982) to demonstrate how red, particularly blood red, functions as a destabilizing element designed to efface liminalities both within the series and between series and viewer. Through their interdependence, the above elements effect the ultimate

implication of the viewer within the series' system—revealing not a structure designed merely to invite the viewer inside but an abattoir elegantiarum constructed around them.

1 The Unspeakably Bespoke

Originally aired on American broadcast television, *Hannibal*'s thirty-nine episodes investigate the professional and interpersonal entanglements of FBI profiler Will Graham and psychopathic psychiatrist and cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter. Brought out of early retirement by the FBI to solve vexing cases, Graham possesses the rare gift of entering the mindset of serial killers and unwinding their motivations in a fashion that aids in solving their idiosyncratic and baffling crimes. However, his talents come at a tremendous psychic cost, rendering Graham sensitive and psychologically vulnerable. This intrigues Lecter, who senses an obverse but kindred spirit in Graham. Brought in to assist Graham and serve as his therapist—ostensibly keeping Graham's demons at bay—the psychiatrist is intrigued and threatened by the FBI profiler and his empathic gifts, as they risk revealing Lecter's crimes. Their relationship involves a *folie à deux*. They collaborate to solve baroque serial murders while simultaneously, the characters become ever more interpersonally enmeshed; the “empathetically damaged” FBI agent being embraced, studied, and manipulated by Lecter for the latter's amusement and self-gratification.

Hannibal serves up a specific kind of text, one existing within an intertext created by Thomas Harris's novels and the film adaptations united by the cannibalistic doctor's presence. Described by Andrew Scahill (2016) as a “preboot,” a portmanteau word combining the recreative notions of the reboot with the prefix “pre-,” this version of the characters and events presents a distinct take that comes before the texts it reimagines. As a television series, *Hannibal* is mainly set before the action of *Red Dragon*, the earliest novel featuring Lecter, and the film adaptations based upon it.³ However, in keeping with the reboot concept, it is a series that fundamentally differs from the previous textual materials. *Hannibal*'s “operational aesthetic,” Scahill (2016, 320) writes, “[...] is to marvel at the sophisticated play of references, the modes of reflection, and the interaction between the known narrative ('now') and newly constructed narrative ('then').”

3 *Manhunter*, directed by Michael Mann (1986; Wilmington, NC: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group); *Red Dragon*, directed by Brett Ratner (2002; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Pictures).

With this version, Fuller offers a mashup that remixes and refashions elements taken from those texts and the subsequent novels and their adaptations—including characters, scenarios, and dialog—using their guts to weave his distinct designs (McLean 2015, 8). In its most comprehensive irony, this series consumes elements from the existing materials in the *Hannibal* intertext, “cannibalizing both novels and films for their parts in ways that simultaneously reflect and exceed them” (Morimoto 2019, 266). Fuller’s take is unabashed in repositioning, repurposing, re-gendering, and fundamentally altering familiar elements from these earlier texts. As Stacey Abbott (2018) describes it, *Hannibal* is palimpsestic, its take producing a text that is uncanny in the psychoanalytic sense, one simultaneously familiar and strange, especially to viewers steeped in the texts that compose the broader Hannibal Lecter intertext (Raines 2018).

Among its many significant changes, the series is updated to its present of the 2010s. This change results in a narrative that simultaneously transpires before (in terms of its placement if the intertext’s events are ordered chronologically) and after (in the literal temporality of its setting) the action of the previously written and lensed versions of these characters and events. Equally, the series makes pronounced changes to the characters, sometimes altering their sex, race, or sexual orientation, and even goes so far as to reposition dialog, taking passages from those novels and films and placing them in the mouths of different characters, in the process fundamentally altering their meaning (Raines 2018). In so doing, Fuller fashions a version of the characters and events that ultimately cannot fit comfortably within a shared narrative chronology and characterization. Rather than merely erasing or reinscribing those earlier texts, the series offers an especially well-considered, eviscerating deconstruction with implications for its appreciative television audience.

Fuller has described his take on the characters as the ultimate fan fiction (Scarano 2014). Although this formulation problematically effaces the legal and creatively privileged distinctions that separate the creator of a television series based on a licensed adaptation from the amateur labour undertaken by fan communities (Later 2018), as with fan fiction, *Hannibal* is a series that takes pre-existing elements such as characters and scenarios and refashions them towards distinct ends, whether by filling in narrative gaps in the earlier text or by pushing things into heretofore unexplored terrain. The televisual *Hannibal* offers a complex slash/fiction take, foregrounding the queerness suppressed in these earlier texts (Kustritz 2003). Slash/fiction is a form of fan-produced fiction that creates stories centred on romantic, often sexual relationships read as suppressed in the canonical texts by this fandom. Although not exclusively, most often, slash/fiction focuses on male/male queer relationships.

In the case of *Hannibal*, this relationship would be read as “Lecter/Graham”: that is, “Lecter *slash* Graham.” Queering the text, in this sense, foregrounds what Madhavi Menon terms “the larger lived realities of desire” (2011, 9). Sean Donovan describes the series as one that “elevate[s] and valorise[s]” its characters’ “queer potential” (2016, 40).

The term ‘queer’ is intended to activate a broad host of associations like the one offered by David Halperin that covers anything “at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (1995). *Hannibal*, in exemplifying a “defiant intention” to erase the stable boundaries offered by its predecessor texts within the broader intertext, “can be considered queer because of its disobedient stance against convention” (Lewerenz 2019, 59). Equally, the intertext and its genre(s) are queered by the series’ erasure of the liminalities that typically separate the normative and non-normative behavior that distinguish the protagonist from the procedural’s criminals or horror’s monsters. In breaking down standard binary divisions, *Hannibal* exhibits a hallmark of the queer text, exposing what Menon describes as the “absurdity of limits” (2011, 7).

In the homonymous Thomas Harris novel (1999), Lecter and FBI agent Clarice Starling share a “will they or won’t they,” “cat and mouse” romantic relationship located in the intersection of Starling’s obsessive quest to locate the fugitive doctor and Lecter’s fascination towards and toying with Starling. Their relationship is complex, freighted by Starling’s displeasure with the doctor’s methods and activities and her quest to bring him to justice. Due to issues mired in the web of copyright and licensing created by the prior adaptation of Harris’ *The Silence of the Lambs*, Fuller’s series is forced to eliminate the female Starling. Instead, as televisual series, *Hannibal* relocates these professional, sexual, and romantic tensions to the relationship between two men: the malevolent psychiatrist and the inspector Graham. Unlike Starling or the *Hannibal* viewer, Graham is further burdened by uncertainty over much of a series where, for a time, he believes Lecter is a colleague helping to solve vexing serial murders and a therapeutic confidante assisting the investigator in maintaining his sanity.

Throughout the series, instances abound that reinforce the queer dimensions of the relationship between these two characters (Donovan 2016). Perhaps the most visually striking occurs in the season two episode “Naka-Choko.”⁴ One of the alterations the series makes to Harris’ novels is changing the sex of a psychiatric colleague of Graham’s at the FBI. The novels’ male Alan Bloom

4 *Hannibal*, season 2, episode 10, “Naka-Choko,” directed by Vincenzo Natali, written by Steve Lightfoot and Kai Yu Wu, aired May 2, 2014. NBC.

thus becomes the series' female Alana. More than a colleague, in the series' first season, Bloom becomes intimate with Graham in a romantic relationship foreshortened by Graham's deteriorating mental state. In the second season, she has a similarly brief dalliance with Lecter. Located towards the end of that season, this episode offers a dreamlike, haunting sex scene. Intercut with Graham having sex in his home with another woman are shots of Bloom and Lecter likewise engaged in Lecter's bedroom. As the sequence progresses, it blurs the distinctions between the two locations. For his part, Graham sees Bloom replace the woman he is with, sexually imbricating Graham and Lecter through Bloom's intercessory figure. The sequence culminates by producing a fantasy *ménage à trois* with Bloom placed visually between the two men in the same bed, her character serving as an ambivalent screen. In assessing the sequence, Jeff Casey (2015) writes that "narratively the sex scene recuperates both men as heterosexual, but visually the sequence blurs the erotic boundaries between everyone involved" (560). As they concentrate on her pleasure from opposite sides, she is the screen upon which the male characters project their desires. However, equally, she is a barrier, a liminality that is all that separates the two men from physical consummation with one another.

As that sequence suggests, instead of the more typical slash/fiction take that focuses on the physical consummation of a romantic relationship between central characters such as Graham and Lecter, *Hannibal* presents something more fundamentally queer. This queerness incorporates genre itself. Given the crime-solving nature of the series, with its focus on investigators locating clues and evidence to arrest serial killers and put an end to their crimes, *Hannibal* seems to be a police procedural. However, as Sean Donovan observes, examined closely, the series is revealed as wearing "very convincing crime procedural drag" (2016, 48). According to Donovan, "*Hannibal* provides an example of how the crime procedural genre might be queered: with a prideful procession of style over substance and a tactful obstruction of traditionally normative concepts of 'justice'" (47).

In the procedural, a rational protagonist-detective working as an agent of the state surmounts obstacles to the truth, meting out fundamental justice and restoring order and safety through their pursuit of the criminal and their accumulation of knowledge. However, as Michael Arntfield describes the genre, ultimately, it presents the well-oiled machinery of policing as a public good. A genre designed to spotlight the inherent dangers of crime in the city, the police procedural acts to valorise justice through the intercession of the police investigation, the solving of the crime, and the restoration of societal order. As its vehicle, the detective "is doggedly followed by interpersonal complex-

ities that simultaneously subvert the reliability of the human and exalt the supremacy of the machine" (2011, 89). In describing *Hannibal* as queering the genre, Donovan explains, "Will Graham cannot be the procedural's dream of a rational detective-protagonist. Where other characters are buoyed by the strength of their faith (and the show's faith) in processes of police detection, Will is [...] willfully enchanted by the decadent source of historic queer villainy he has supposedly been tasked with blotting out of the world for good" (48).

The series is designed so the viewer is similarly enchanted. In its upending of the police procedural's generic norms, its unexpectedly abstract consummations of the relationship between its central characters, and its evisceration of what came before it within the *Hannibal* intertext, the series is defamiliarizing, making the entire experience of the intertext strange even to the otherwise familiar consumer of police procedural or *Hannibal* intertext. Put differently, the series *queers* characters, genre and intertext, opening non-normative positions and perspectives for characters and viewers alike. Furthermore, through its aesthetic, *Hannibal* fashions a formally beautiful screen world of horrifying grotesquery, a gothic neo-noir that constructs an abattoir elegantiarum. In place of the Russian formalists' aspirations towards an expressive form that would restore the stoniness of the stone (Shklovsky 1917, 2), however, this structure offers something more akin to the blood-redness of the blood or the sallow fleshiness of the flesh.

Its wallowing in meticulously rendered depravity exposes a postmodern neo-Decadent text preoccupied with its expression in fashion, a creative domain which, in its constant churning, reimagining, discarding, and replacement, is emblematic of consumer capitalism. In a description that strongly resonates with *Hannibal*, Terry Eagleton describes the postmodern subject as "a dispersed, decentred network of libidinal attachments, emptied of ethical substance and psychical interiority, the ephemeral function of this or that act of consumption, media experience, sexual relationship, trend or *fashion*" (quoted in Dollimore 2018, 102, emphasis added). At the risk of a pun in bad taste, Lecter and his culinary and sartorial predilections render corporeal and visceral the dark implications of this "consumption."

2 A Well-Tailored Person Suit

Even beyond the Roman Imperial origins of the arbiter elegantiarum, as a fashion and style hub Italy proves especially significant to the series. In his 1528 treatise *The Book of the Courtier*, author Baldassare Castiglione introduced the

word “sprezzatura” into the Italian lexicon. Applied in that text to the invisible work of the courtier, sprezzatura has been described as “facility in accomplishing difficult actions which hides the conscious effort that went into them” (Rebhorn 1978, 33). The term has further been characterized “as a form of defensive irony: the ability to disguise what one really desires, feels, thinks, and means or intends behind a mask of apparent reticence and nonchalance” (Berger 2002, 297). Particularly as applied in English to the arts, style, and fashion, sprezzatura tends to translate to “studied carelessness” (Safire, 2002), another way of suggesting that the effort or motivation put into the mode of personal style such as dress is concealed behind a mask of effortlessness. Given the meticulousness of the series and its title character, *Hannibal* would seem an unlikely site to exhibit an effortless style or nonchalance. Ironically, in its carefully constructed *mise-en-scène*, *Hannibal* serves up a particularly devious form of sprezzatura which uses the aestheticization of the horrors and violence so often on display to conceal its goal of viewer complicity.

At the risk of torturing the comparison, the series’ embodiment of Decadence might be phrased as a *scalpelgliatura*, a portmanteau combining the surgical implement favoured by Doctor Lecter with the name of an Italian art movement, *Scapigliatura*. This was a proto-Decadent movement whereby artists sought to rejuvenate their regional culture by embracing bohemianism in opposition to the then-dominant culture, a move thought to have paved the way for the subsequent European adoption of Decadence. With its deliberate embrace of excess, artificiality and the unnatural, the Decadents reflected a view holding art solely for art’s sake, as deliberately against nature, as creative practice opposed to the norms of morality and sexual behaviour.⁵ This series offers a similarly unnatural art, albeit one distinct from bohemianism. Instead, *Hannibal*’s expression of “scalpelgliatura” fashions an abattoir *elegantiarum* that behaves in a context updated to the present moment and the series’ concerns, one where aestheticization can simultaneously embody a text pre-occupied with mediated and spectacular takes on murderous depravity while capturing the problematics of viewer identification and enjoyment of these very aspects.

5 A late nineteenth-century Western European and American movement in visual arts and literature with roots in France in the works of poets such as Charles Baudelaire, the Decadents rejected what they saw as the banality of progress and the natural world in the *fin-de-siècle* period. Among the exemplars of Decadence is French novelist Joris-Karl Huysmans, whose 1884 novel *À rebours* (translated as “Against Nature” or “Against the Grain”) captures the animating spirit and ideas of the movement.

While there can be no doubt that Will Graham, the proverbial “he who fights monsters” in the Nietzschean sense,⁶ is the protagonist of the series, it is worth recalling that its title is “Hannibal.” More than merely serving as a reappropriation of the title of the third, not-so-well-received novel of the *Hannibal* intertext, this choice of series title underscores the character’s centrality to its construction. Although he is not the protagonist, it would equally be a mistake to characterize Lecter as the antagonist. *Hannibal* places Doctor Lecter at its fulcrum as its point of view. The title serves as an unconscious reminder of the source of its take. Acknowledging this explains why and how the series works, illuminating its formal and aesthetic choices. This perspective underscores how these choices serve a construct that ultimately aligns the viewer with Lecter. Simultaneously, it collapses liminalities separating hero and villain, over time blurring the distinctions between the doctor and the FBI profiler collaborating with and hunting him. As the series’ creator describes its aesthetic, “[E]very moment consciously plays with the juxtaposition of gorgeousness and visceral terror with the effect [...] of slowly luring the audience into a sense of being in collusion with Hannibal” (Logsdon 2017, 2). By framing much of the narrative and its investigations through the FBI profiler, the series uses Graham as one such lure—rendered metaphorically in the series’ repeated references to fishing and the handcrafted lures made by Graham—pulling the unaware viewer closer and closer to an alignment with Lecter, much as Graham’s empathic style ultimately collapses the barriers between himself and the doctor.

An oenophile, gourmand, and aesthete of refined and iconoclastic tastes and manners, Hannibal Lecter savours the finer things in life, from classical music and opera to fine art and fine dining, including a well-appointed home, meticulous office furnishings, and an impeccably chosen idiosyncratically bespoke wardrobe. On one level, these refined consumer tastes reflect class distinction. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu, “To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, [...] corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of ‘class.’ The manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it [...]” (2010, xxv). Moreover, more so than in the prior literary and cinematic incarnations of Lecter, in this televisual version, the epicurean cannibal’s wardrobe choices are the key to understanding both the character and the series itself, as they offer a metonymic reflection of its broader system. This series presents a world conceived for and worn by Lecter. It is difficult, if not impossible, not to read the series’ close attention to

6 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886).

fashion as an implicit critique of the disposability that fashion implies, operating as an expression of consumer culture, an impression which is exacerbated by the recognition that Hannibal Lecter is a cannibal—a dark metaphor for consumerism in its ultimate, extractive form.

The series' careful attention to this *scalpelgliatura* echoes the link between fashion and violence identified by Elana Gomel (2011) in Bret Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho*. In closely reading that novel, Gomel identifies a relationship between violence and fashion where the former is shown to be contestable, ephemeral, and contingent, whereas the latter is reflective of the Real (2011, 51–52). Unlike the unreliability of Ellis' narrator Patrick Bateman, which produces an overall effect where, by its conclusion, whether any of the gruesome crimes he describes ever actually transpired is unclear, the televisual *Hannibal* serves up horrific tableaux where there is little question of their diegetic occurrence. Even so, Gomel's broader consideration, how these murders might be seen to matter within its context, is revealed to be every bit as unexpected. As Gomel describes it, *American Psycho*'s protagonist/narrator tries to anchor himself by consuming luxury goods. In contrast, the crimes described catalogue his displaced discomfort with his inability to be effectively anchored. Contrastingly, although equally embodying the psychiatrist's self-identity and what Gomel terms the “violent sublime,” Lecter's bespoke clothing choices are consistent with his bespoke, baroque murders. In this, his wardrobe choices form an equally expressive adjunct to the aesthetics of his murders and his meticulously prepared cannibalistic meals. Suiting this distinct form taken by the violent sublime in *Hannibal*, in place of the fetishist use of the designer wear Bateman favours and describes in excruciating detail, Lecter's wardrobe is composed of attire made specifically and exclusively for him.

Alone among the series' characters, the attire favoured by Lecter is overwhelmingly commissioned and bespoke. This is true within the confines of the narrative and as a practical matter of the production itself. While the show's costume designer, Christopher Hargadon, was involved in conceptualizing and designing the pieces, the work was generally carried out by bespoke clothiers in Toronto, Canada, where the series was filmed. Close attention to the suits reveals the fine detailing associated with bespoke attire, such as contrasting pick-stitching, flapped lapel pockets, ticket pockets, and functional suit cuffs, otherwise known as “surgeon's cuffs.” Likewise, the cinematography renders the materials' textural quality visible, especially the tweeds and flannels, adding a haptic visuality to the high-quality garments and showcasing the “tweediness of the tweeds.” The higher-than-normal button stance of the coats is slightly elongating—making Lecter appear tall and more physically intimidating and

perhaps adding a touch of menace. These are not off-the-rack goods. Instead, these are suits carefully tailored not to perfection but to the idiosyncratic tastes of a man who prefers longer than typical sleeves and trousers.

Favouring two-button, side-vented, three-piece suits with peak lapels, his style choices fit neither the cliché of the stuffy academic nor the hip anachronism of the three-piece revival spurred by the popularity of AMC's *Mad Men* (2007–2015).⁷ Instead, the clothing befits a wearer who, as with the Decadents, sees himself as above and apart from society's rules and conventions. In the iconoclasm of his wardrobe choices, Lecter is linked to Decadent literary dandies such as Joris-Karl Huysmans' Des Esseintes and Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, who likewise opt for deliberate aesthetic choices in elements such as their wardrobes not to distinguish themselves and set themselves apart from their surrounding humanity, but to, in effect, set themselves against it. As Maria Ionita (2014) frames things, Lecter's aestheticism reflects his "refined tastes, but also a subliminal echo of his obsession with transformation through artifice. Lecter's highly dissimulative nature is predicated on the sublimation of violence into art. From murder to sophisticated dish or artful death tableau, his concern is primarily with creating emotion through extravagant spectacle. He is conceived as a deadly variation on the nineteenth-century dandy, an artist whose sole creation is his very existence" (27). Rather than being idiosyncratic or affected, Lecter's wardrobe is violently assertive, expressing an antagonistic, even literally misanthropic iconoclasm.

Perhaps the most significant cultural legacy of the Decadents, the dandy has been described as a "*fin-de-siècle* figure of the man of fashion" (Gomel 2011, 52). He is characterized by Rhonda Garelick (1995) as "a personality that encompasses its own mechanically reproduced versions, and eventually seems indistinguishable from them," one centred on "the performance of a highly stylized, painstakingly constructed self, a solipsistic social icon" (3). This lived and performed artifice, expressed as Decadent "art for art's sake" in wardrobe choices designed to be noticed and to stand against the grain, is embodied literally in the form of Oscar Wilde's (2006) dandy-murderer protagonist in his *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Asserting this novel's "indisputable influence on *Hannibal*," Sean Donovan (2016) identifies how Wilde's text "brought a distinctly queer gaze to power dynamics between men," offering "erotic, over-stylized queer masculinities" (46). More than mere superficial play, John Dollimore (2018) identifies a fundamental attribute of the inversion of stable cultural binaries of the *fin-de-siècle* within Wilde's work, their overturning, as a necessary

7 *Mad Men* (2007–2015; Los Angeles: AMC) TV.

step in their eventual displacement (96). Quoting David Kunzle in linking his work to Wilde's, Dollimore goes on to offer that "the playful bears the seeds of revolution. 'Pure' formal fantasy and subversive desire, far from being mutually exclusive, are two sides of the same coin" (2018, 98; quoting Kunzle 1978, 88).

A man of enthralling beauty, Gray becomes enamoured of the hedonistic lifestyle practiced by the aristocrat Lord Henry Wotton. Through Wotton, he embraces the idea that beauty and sensual pleasures are all that matter in life. Disturbed by the realisation that his beauty will fade, Gray schemes to sell his soul for eternal youth. A deal is struck, and a portrait is painted. While Gray remains youthful and unblemished, this painting records all his sins and scars. Whereas Gray ultimately resorts to murder to escape his artifice as an immortal dandy and fashion-conscious late twentieth-century dandy Patrick Bateman "remains trapped in his role as social icon" despite the murders he claims to have committed (Gomel 2011, 52), as suggested by Ionita (2014), for Lecter in Fuller's series, the wardrobe is of a piece with the murders as an equal expression of the sublimation of violence in artistic expression—the two treated as the opposite sides of the same coin.

In place of the sedate business uniforms more commonly associated with professional men in the televisual crime procedural but as befits a man of such ostensibly refined and idiosyncratic tastes, Lecter's somewhat Neapolitan attire expresses sprezzatura, with colours including deep, rich greens, blues, and browns, often featuring remarkably bold chalk stripe, glen check, plaid, or windowpane patterns. One memorable suit is dark grey with a deep red windowpane that, in its disruption of the more sedate background, metaphorically calls to mind the violence, blood, and viscera always lurking just beneath the surface of *Hannibal's* world.

Lecter pairs these suits with floral print and paisley ties, invariably finished with a (sometimes dimpled) double Windsor knot and combined with carefully complementary pocket silks in his breast pocket. The ties are generally, but not always, worn with wider spread collar shirts selected from a broad palette of colours and patterns and perfectly paired with these suits and ties. When he requires formal attire, he is likelier to opt for the eye-catching look of a burgundy, floral, or striped dinner jacket than a conventional tuxedo. This is a man who knows how he wants to present himself. His professional demeanour allows the bolder choices not to be perceived as affected but instead reflective of the confident sense of personal style and taste of a man of means who, in this case with some irony given his extracurricular activities, does not want to blend into the background.

When Lecter murders someone, he does not remove his dress clothing, which he wears over a body that his analyst calls a "very well-tailored person

suit.”⁸ If the circumstances are likely to be messy, he dons what looks like a zip-front, hoodless hazmat suit over his dress attire. Since this plastic, zippered garment is transparent, his dress clothing remains visible underneath it. That he leaves on the dress attire is significant, as his donning of the protective gear indicates that he has had time to change his clothes. It offers a reminder that Lecter’s wardrobe reflects an identity he cannot jettison even in murder. His bespoke wardrobe is an aspect of the decadent pleasure he pursues in his murderous and consumptive acts. This attention to a kind of aesthetic expression distinguishes Lecter from other serialized killers, such as Dexter Morgan of the series *Dexter* (2006–2013),⁹ who exhibits a more clinical, surgical approach to his murders. Equally, this choice reflects the series’ design more generally, with only a thin skin shielding society from the discolouring effects of the violent depredations that inform and construct it—emanating from the surface like the red windowpane of the earlier described suit—effects that are always visible for those willing to see them.

3 ‘This Is My Design’

Although no stranger to quotidian homicide, far more memorable are those baroque presentations of murder that shape and drive the series’ investigations. These *Grand Guignol* crimes’ aftermaths structure the series itself, providing the foundation and framing of its abattoir elegantiarum. Whether by Lecter’s hands or those of one of the myriad serial offenders under investigative scrutiny, human bodies take on artistic, architectural, and sculptural, abstract qualities—becoming shapes and design elements, more or even rather than the remains of victims. When Graham ponders a crime scene, intoning his mantra of murderous intent, “This is my design,” to enter the killer’s headspace, observe how even his chosen term, “design,” denotes aesthetics and fashion. The series then presents a more literal take on what novelist Harris briefly describes in the novel *Red Dragon*: “a pendulum swung in darkness” (Harris 1981, 11). Onscreen time runs backward, undoing the transformations that have transpired in the killing, as Graham begins his narration and walkthrough of the murder with the viewer. In so doing, the series reveals murder as a visceral form of production design.

8 *Hannibal*, season 1, episode 7, “Sorbet,” directed by James Foley, written by Jesse Alexander and Bryan Fuller, aired May 9, 2013. NBC.

9 *Dexter* (2006–2013; Los Angeles: Showtime) TV.

These murders, which structure episodes, are fascinating, their serial nature self-reflexively invoking the seriality of the ongoing drama itself. “[T]he new concept was the singular evil of seriality itself,” Philip Jenkins notes in an essay examining seriality and serial murder as a modern form of the monstrous, “Augmenting the horror of the individual crimes are the attributes of delay, repeated premeditation, and compulsivity” (2002, 2). The series presents serial murder as a feature of postmodernity, with the compulsivity of Hannibal’s meticulous preparation and subsequent consumption of his victims’ body parts and organs only the most obvious expression of an extreme form of twenty-first-century consumer capitalism at the apex of its decadence. This seriality underscores the viewer’s decadent complicity: returning week after week to consume the aestheticized onscreen horror vicariously.

As centrepiece elements of a series unencumbered by concerns about realism, the various murder scenes serve as a creative showcase for both the writers and the production designers. Although they capture the ritualized aspects of serial murder, unlike their generally less baroque, real-world counterparts, these crimes largely eschew the highly sexualized (and often misogynistic) violence ubiquitous to serial predation (Nussbaum 2019, 251). Instead, designed for visual impact, the resulting crime scenes are defined by an overarching uncanniness, with the solution of each serving up novel viewing pleasures that speak to and implicate viewer complicity. As Richard Logsdon describes them, these aestheticized displays of murder “[... deny] the sanctity of human life,” offering “instead a disturbing, even diabolical beauty that defies the aesthetic standards of the great art works of Western Civilization [...] that many viewers likely find stunning and beautiful, and that lure the fascinated viewer further into Hannibal’s dark world. Thus [...] these monuments of gore may prove as fascinating to the viewer as they probably do to Hannibal and thus represent points at which the viewer [...] experiences the sense of having been lured into a kind of unholy, even vile partnership with Hannibal” (2017, 56).

Arranged as tableaux, ritual crimes take on a pseudo-religiosity, such as a Totem pole fashioned from human remains.¹⁰ There is also a killer who flays and stretches his victims’ back skin so that it can be suspended from wire to fan out like angels’ wings.¹¹ The latter produces a resulting aesthetic that at one point pays visual homage to Jonathan Demme’s cinematic adaptation of Thomas Harris’ *The Silence of the Lambs*, furthering *Hannibal*’s intertex-

10 *Hannibal*, season 1, episode 9, “Trou Normand,” directed by Steve Lightfoot, written by Guillermo Navarro, aired May 23, 2013. NBC.

11 *Hannibal*, season 1, episode 5, “Coquilles,” directed by Guillermo Navarro, written by Scott Nimerfro and Bryan Fuller, aired April 25, 2013. NBC.

tual imbrication with and reworking of other Hannibal texts. There are crimes with an unexpected relationship to the natural world, including a killer who lobotomizes his victims to make them amenable to act as organic beehives¹² and another killer who shallowly plants his still-barely-living victims in the ground rather than burying them, their dying bodies fertilizing mulch for cultivating mushrooms.¹³ Moreover, there are those serial crimes that hinge on their supposed transformative effect on the killers themselves. These include both the family murders carried out by the “Red Dragon,” where, with each serial instance of mass murder, the killer feels closer to transcending his human form and becoming the dragon, and the killer who has technologically fashioned a wearable, mechanical apparatus designed to allow him to experience his kills as a prehistoric cave bear.¹⁴ Invariably, the serial murders on display evince a dark version of transformation, whether of killer, victim, or both, that suggests the victim is something other than a human body within *Hannibal*’s aesthetic system.

Most intriguing are those murders that incorporate a self-reflexive visuality implicating the viewer’s voyeuristic enjoyment of the crimes. One example involves Lecter’s murder of Beverly Katz,¹⁵ an FBI agent who comes close to solving his crimes. Her frozen, clothed body has been dissected vertically. The resulting small slices are each encased in a transparent medium and vertically displayed in an homage to Damien Hirst’s artwork, specifically his 1993 work *Mother and Child Divided*, “in which the bodies of a cow and its calf are split in two from nose to tail and displayed in two glass tanks positioned a few feet apart so that patrons can walk between them” (Abbott 2018, 559). Katz is a museum exhibit of “the visible investigator” left for Graham to discover. This presentation of life-sized microscope slides offers an ironic play on the idea of investigation itself, one where the pieces could indeed “tell the story,” if only reassembly into their former whole were possible. Although the viewer, unlike investigator Graham, knows that Lecter is the culprit of Katz’s demise, the scene is presented more as retardation of that discovery—a criminal lark prolonging Graham’s proof of Lecter as the killer—rather than a mystery that demands to be solved urgently.

12 *Hannibal*, season 2, episode 4, “Takiawase,” directed by David Semel, written by Scott Nimerfro and Bryan Fuller, aired March 21, 2014. NBC.

13 *Hannibal*, season 1, episode 2, “Amuse-Bouche,” directed by Michael Rymer, written by Jim Danger Gray, aired April 11, 2013. NBC.

14 *Hannibal*, season 2, episode 9, “Shizakana,” directed by Michael Rymer, written by Jeff Vlaming and Bryan Fuller, aired April 25, 2014. NBC.

15 *Hannibal*, season 2, episode 5, “Mukōzuke,” directed by Michael Rymer, written by Ayanna A. Flood and Steve Lightfoot & Bryan Fuller, aired March 28, 2014. NBC.

Another serial killer has amassed and sewn together a nude cross-section of human races and sexes into a mural in an abandoned grain silo.¹⁶ This killer, James Gray (his last name allusive of both colour and Oscar Wilde's murderous dandy), organizes the victims by skin pigment, darker skin tones in the centre, spiralling outwards in lighter and lighter gradations, the bodies positioned to reveal an arrangement forming an eye when viewed from an overhead perspective. During the investigation, responding to another FBI investigator's accurate assessment that Gray is selecting his victims by their skin tones, when Lecter replies, "The color of our skin is so often politicized. It would almost be refreshing to see someone revel in aesthetics for aesthetics' sake ... if it weren't so horrific," his statement parallels the Decadents' pursuit of art for art's sake. After discovering the murder site and ascending to the silo's roof, Lecter—serving as audience surrogate—responds to the artistry of the presentation, calling down to the killer, "Love your work." The doctor then descends from his perch, conversing with the killer about the latter's work, dispatching him, then sewing the killer into the mural—completing the work and effectively rendering its artist anonymous among the undifferentiated mass.

Lecter avers in their discussion that the killer intended to make a statement on God witnessing his work and his work staring back at God. It is equally the case that, as a structural and visual element, that eye serves as a reminder that the viewer's perspective is shared with and framed by the titular Lecter, reinforcing their complicity in the onscreen horrors. Again, quoting Logsdon on the series' crime tableaux more generally, "Fuller visually and viscerally assaults his viewers with these profane, marginally pornographic displays [...] with the intention not only of destroying the viewer's resistance to the gore [...] but] of creating in the viewer a hungering for more of the gory and grotesque art displays [...]. [It] is a hungering that derives from a perverse fascination that the viewer shares with Hannibal and that reinforces Fuller's intention to continue building upon the sense of being in collusion with Hannibal" (Logsdon 2017, 57).

4 Blood-Red Is the New Black

Shot for HDTV broadcast using the digital ARRI camera system, *Hannibal* employs a controlled colour palette. Rather than faithfully reproducing the world's

16 *Hannibal*, season 2, episode 2, "Sakizuki," directed by Tim Hunter, written by Jeff Vlaming and Bryan Fuller, aired March 7, 2014. NBC.

visual spectrum, the series' aesthetic deliberately manipulates tonalities for effect—offering a dark fictional world defined by unrealistically cool and warm colours pushed digitally to achieve the kind of effect associated with the cinematic neo-noir aesthetic (Glitre 2009). According to R. Barton Palmer, “violence and moral ambiguity, as well as murky character and action, create the effect of film noir, which is nothing less than making the spectator experience what these desperate characters feel: anguish and insecurity” (Palmer 2015, 19). Although neo-noir shares this mood and attitude with its predecessor, rather than considering it a more recent continuation of an ongoing tendency in moving image media with cinematic roots, neo-noir is marked by features that distinguish it from classic film noir. Neo-noir is defined by its self-consciousness—a deliberate invocation of noir qua noir in terms of both style and mood (Bould, Glitre and Tuck 2009)—that was not available to classic noir when establishing its familiar tropes, from the pervasive sense of existentialism, fatalism, even nihilism to the chiaroscuro lighting that defines so much of the visual aesthetic. Unlike in film noir, colour dominates neo-noir, whereas black and white cinematography becomes the relative exception. Kathrina Glitre, examining the use of colour in neo-noir, describes its “world [as] a treacherous place, where internal anxieties bleed out, disrupting realism in favour of expressionist stylization” (2009, 12). With an aesthetic that calls to mind nothing so much as the deliberate choices of art cinema, *Hannibal's* refashioning of its tonalities allows for a pervasive sense of darkness and the cool detachment and artifice of noir, as befits both the milieu and the perspective of the titular Hannibal, even while it captures the rich, carefully curated hues of Lecter's wardrobe or the blood and viscera often on display. Although the series is, overall, quite dark, in place of the chiaroscuro associated with the inky blacks of the historical film noir—which were typically lensed in black and white—*Hannibal's* use of a pervasively cool, dark colour system with the occasional irruption of warmth feeds what could be called its *charnelscuro*.

Among the various colours that define *Hannibal's* colour palette, red is particularly significant. While it does not always dominate the aesthetic of scenes, it serves as a striking accent colour in various contexts that point towards its importance as something other than a mere addition to the colour spectrum. In addition to the earlier referenced windowpane of Lecter's suit, shades of red appear in the wardrobe choices of several characters, ranging from the doctor's ties and pocket silks to a sweater worn by FBI psychiatrist Alana Bloom, as well as to the lipstick favoured by Bloom and Lecter's psychiatrist Bedelia Du Maurier. Furthermore, in the form of feathers, red is a crucial colour in the handcrafted fishing lures made by Graham, which, in addition to their metaphorical function, serve the narrative when Lecter uses them to frame Graham

for the crimes he has himself committed so he can derail the investigation into those murders. However, the most obvious use of red is the copious amounts of blood resulting from the various murders.

Given the series' subject matter, it is unsurprising that blood would factor heavily into its palette. However, it is surprising how effectively the series' aesthetic transforms blood's reds into another visual element, which exists more as an accent colour in its digital system than as biological effluent. Although the use of blood remains visceral, it does so as much in the metaphorical as literal sense, with its rich, blackish reds disrupting the otherwise cool tonalities of *Hannibal*. Summarizing Julia Kristeva's semiotic-psychoanalytic argument on colour, which is particularly apropos to considerations of the series' use of red, theorist David Batchelor notes that, for Kristeva, "Colour [...] is linked to 'subject/object indeterminacy,' to a state before the self is formed in language, before the world is fully differentiated from the subject. And colour always exists as a disruption in the symbolic order [...]. Consequently, 'the chromatic experience constitutes a menace to the "self."' (Batchelor 2000, 82, quoting Kristeva 1980, 220–221). Kristeva could have been referring to *Hannibal* when she observed, "'Colour is the shattering of unity.' It is as if colour begins not just to interrupt the process of self-formation, but to throw it into reverse; it is as if colour serves to de-differentiate the self and de-form the world" (Batchelor 2000, 82, quoting Kristeva 1980, 220–221). Blood, as red, serves this function in the series.

In discussing the murders perpetrated by the Red Dragon,¹⁷ the long-running investigation that drives the series narrative to its conclusion, Lecter suggests to Graham that the killer might be selecting his target families partly based on the privacy afforded by their back yards. A lunar cycle killer who strikes when the moon is full, as the doctor observes, this unknown subject might like to step out into the yard after the killings to observe the effect of blood on his naked skin. "Have you ever seen blood in the moonlight, Will?" Lecter asks, "It appears quite black." Episodes later, Graham and Lecter have dispatched this killer violently, leaving them drenched in his blood and their own. While observing his blood-soaked form, Graham comments, "It really does look black in the moonlight."¹⁸ This confirmation underscores Graham and Lecter's de-differentiation,

17 *Hannibal*, season 3, episode 9, "... And the Woman Clothed with the Sun," directed by John Dahl, written by Jeff Vlaming & Helen Shang and Bryan Fuller and Steve Lightfoot, aired August 1, 2015. NBC.

18 *Hannibal*, season 3, episode 13, "The Wrath of the Lamb," directed by Michael Rymer, written by Bryan Fuller & Steve Lightfoot & Bryan Fuller & Nick Antosca, aired August 29, 2015. NBC.

their violent consummation having fused them into a unified, de-individuated object through the blackish, blood-red that pervades both their forms and the series. Their subsequent joint plunge off a cliff into the sea below, an ostensible act of mutual suicide that consummates their relationship, simultaneously underlines their fusion—neither Graham nor Lecter capable of subduing, besting, or being apart from the other. In so doing, this expresses what Julia Kristeva (1982) characterizes in terms of the abject. For Kristeva, abjection exists in the human reaction to the horrific, when affective responses like revulsion and terror threaten the symbolic order that constitutes the distinction between self and other, subject and object. As she puts it, “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (Kristeva 1982, 10). Further, as an expression of the abject, the visible blood-red covering the clenched forms of Lecter and Graham disrupts the symbolic order that distinguishes series and viewer, erasing the distinction between them, underscoring the perspective of the abattoir elegantiarum as the site of identification and pleasures.

5 All in ‘Good Taste’

Rather than end there, the episode and series conclude with an opaque post-credit sequence—the music from the prior sequence acting as a linking sound bridge. “Dressed to the nines in an evening gown slit down to her navel” (French 2019, 178) and seated at a formally appointed, candle-lit table, Bedelia Du Maurier, Lecter’s erstwhile analyst and one-time traveling companion, breathes nervously. The camera pulls back, displaying a carefully arranged and well-presented length of smoke-emanating roast centred on the table. The next shot slowly trails the side of Du Maurier’s seated form, revealing the source of the meal as her amputated leg. She removes a sharp, two-pronged fork from the table, surreptitiously concealing it in her lap. It remains unclear who else is there with her and the threat they pose. As Kara M. French notes (2019), Du Maurier consistently functions as an audience surrogate throughout the series. Her unique role as Lecter’s analyst suggests she possesses insights into his character unavailable to other series characters—insights akin to the audience’s awareness of his violence and culinary proclivities. According to French, that final sequence underscores the character’s role as an audience surrogate, with the “ambiguity of that final image [inviting] the audience to engage in meaning making with the text, thus blurring the line between passive observers and active participants in the blood opera *Hannibal*” (170).

Befitting a series so thoroughly preoccupied with a dark culinary art, the elements described above, which form *Hannibal's* abattoir elegantiarum, are all about presentation. Like a well-plated dish, *Hannibal* serves up violent delights to the viewer, its potentially disturbing excesses couched in a carefully tailored aesthetic system that renders palatable its charnel house. Even as it makes a show of the careful preparation of meals featuring organs and body parts removed by Lecter from his victims, ultimately, it is likewise in the combination of the wardrobe, production design, and use of blood-red as a visual element that the series reveals its designs and its deconstructive concerns. As a response to the excesses of consumer capitalism in the present moment, *Hannibal* is particularly chilling, its decadent presentation expressing the bottomless depravity that characterizes late capitalism and its willingness to use up and dispose of anything or anyone—while tying the viewer to it. Not unlike the unsuspecting guests attending Lecter's dinner parties, who are invariably and unknowingly served human flesh, on display in *Hannibal* is a particularly perverse work of professional fan fiction. It is a text that, rather than merely serving the viewers what they desire, queers the experience, implicating its "Fannibals" in the onscreen grotesquery, forcing them to confront the discomfiting evisceration of the liminalities ostensibly separating horror from pleasure, revulsion from delight, taste from distaste, consumer from consumed.

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Eat, Sleep, Read, Repeat: Excess and Enjoyment in *Tomie*

Shweta Khilnani

Manga and anime are possibly Japan's most prolific cultural exports that have gained popular recognition and critical acclaim throughout the world. Simply put, manga is the Japanese term for comics which are either released as serial magazines or as *tankobon* (standalone books) that are not part of an anthology. However, for people in Japan, manga is not simply another genre of art or communication. Instead, it is a popular sensation, a ubiquitous form of entertainment, a respected form of storytelling, and a mammoth commercial industry, all at once. Over the past few decades, manga has become a transnational phenomenon, spreading to all parts of the world, even outselling American comics in America (Medina 2019). In the book titled *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*, Frederik L. Schodt categorises manga as “meta media” at the heart of a giant fantasy machine. Schodt adds that a “production cycle typically begins with a story serialized in a weekly, biweekly, monthly, bimonthly or quarterly magazine” (2011, 20). Depending on the performance of the story, it can be compiled into a manga series or adapted as a television anime series. Such is the popularity of the manga serial format that *tachiyomi* (standing reading), where people crowd around a magazine stand or bookstore to read the latest issue of a series is a common practice. Clearly, besides being a sensational literary and cultural global phenomenon, manga also attests to the massive potential of the serial format in the contemporary moment. This chapter will focus precisely on this aspect of the serial mode of storytelling by studying Junji Ito's *Tomie*, a horror manga which was published in the serial format in a magazine called *Monthly Halloween* from 1987 to 2000. The chapter argues that *Tomie* embodies an ineffable excess or surplus, manifested through its serial aesthetic, which is replete with potential and resists easy appropriation. This excess is manifested both in the creative processes and the reading practices engendered by them. More specifically, the storytelling devices and formal techniques of representation which are seminal to the serial narrative model facilitate repetitive readings, produce a subversive form of enjoyment in the readers.

1 Excess and Proliferation

Junji Ito's *Tomie* narrates the story of Tomie, a mysterious adolescent girl who often beguiles and enchants people by way of her inexplicable and irresistible charm. Interestingly, in every story of the manga series, Tomie is killed (often brutally) but she returns in mortal form to regenerate and replicate endlessly. As opposed to the traditional formula followed in detective fiction or police procedurals, where the investigator is the common presence throughout the series, in the case of *Tomie*, it is the victim of the crime who performs a consistent function through the many episodes. The first story of the series, published in 1987, narrates the original instance of Tomie being murdered while on a school trip with her friends. She is pushed off a cliff by her teacher after she threatens to tell everyone about their sexual liaison. Once everyone discovers her dead body, the boys, along with the male teacher, cut her body parts into pieces to destroy any evidence. This scene is portrayed visually in all its gruesomeness in a style that has become synonymous with the manga itself. Later, Tomie makes a shocking appearance at her own funeral and drives several of her killers to insanity and others to suicide. As the manga progresses, we learn that Tomie now possesses the uncanny ability to regenerate herself from a single body part. As long as there are any existing versions of her, she can make multiple copies of herself. Every part of the series follows one (or at times multiple) versions of Tomie as she wreaks havoc on people's lives by beguiling them into performing acts of cruelty on other bodies. This, then, is the general pattern that is repeated across the manga series—an innocent character chances upon Tomie or a part of her and becomes obsessed with her beauty and charm. Eventually, she gains complete control of their bodies and actions and often forces them to propagate the cycle of violence originally performed on her corporeal self.

This form of physical violence is a major source of horror in *Tomie* as almost all stories feature the deformed human body in all its gruesomeness. This characteristic portrayal of the human body and the response it evinces from the readers borders on the abject as theorised by Julia Kristeva in the *Powers of Horror*. For Kristeva, the abject is something that evokes feelings of sheer disgust, fear or repulsion from the viewer or reader. Classic examples of the abject include the sight of a human corpse, an open wound, faeces, or bodily fluids. Such objects derive their power of abjection due to a breakdown in the chain of signification through which meaning is produced. The abject is best defined in terms of what it is not—it is neither subject nor object and it can't be accommodated within the symbolic order of meaning. Kristeva conceptualises it in the following words, "There looms, within abjection, one of those

violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside and inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (1982). It can be imagined as a form of excess which can't be contained within existing structures and thus produces intense reactions of horror. One can find several examples of such abjection in *Tomie*, especially with reference to the portrayal of the human body. At several places, the manga will feature panels with mutilated bodies, severed limbs and fluids oozing from wounds. Such visuals threaten our sense of being as a subject, leading to a collapse of meaning, which eventually invites disgust and fear.

Interestingly, the excess embodied in abjection materialises through the serial form itself. Seriality is often defined in terms of repetition of certain formulaic features like characters, plots, or settings. The peculiar feature about *Tomie* is that repetition is both a formal and a thematic element in the narrative. Just as patterns are rehashed and regenerated in every part of the series, *Tomie* herself is reborn under different circumstances. She is often portrayed as a hyper-sexualised adolescent girl who seduces both men and women. This brand of representation is in line with the dominant tropes of *Shōjo* manga, a sub-category of manga meant primarily for teenage girls in Japan. In *Tomie*, the abject monstrosity of the adolescent female body calls attention to its objectification and fetishization in Japanese society. Racheal Dumas argues that the adolescent girl is often portrayed as a beloved archetype and an object of dangerous allure in *Shōjo* manga. While she constitutes the object of desire, her own erotic agency is constrained by her child-like status (2018, 29). As a result, she is sexually desired and fetishized by many yet she lacks the agency to articulate her own desire in conscious terms. This irony is responsible for the discomfort caused by the figure of the adolescent girl. Contrary to such expectations, *Tomie*'s innocence is only an external mask that she wears in order to beguile other characters. Unlike the stereotypical expectations of adolescence, she articulates her desires (which becomes a source of such horror) and exercises her own agency. This excess, once again, demonstrates the hypocrisy of the social construction of and response to the state of female adolescence. Critics have also read this in the light of the cultural phenomenon of *kawaii* which refers to a "childlike value system oriented towards the narcissistic pleasures of consumption" (Dumas 2018, 26). Many of the stories of this manga are set in typically adolescent landscapes like schools and feature young male and female protagonists who become enamoured with *Tomie*'s physical appearance. This debilitating obsession with *Tomie* also prefigures the anxieties of the *otaku*¹

1 Otaku usually refers to a young person who is obsessed with cultural forms like anime and

culture in the Japanese landscape, especially in the backdrop of the infamous serial murders of young girls between four to seven years of age by Tsutomu Miyazaki, who was nicknamed the “Otaku killer”² by Japanese media outlets.

Interestingly, several stories from the first collection of *Tomie* feature forms of technology which are capable of generating visuals. For instance, in the story titled “Morita Hospital Episode,” the X-ray machine presents abjectly macabre images of Tomie’s kidney growing limbs inside the recipient’s body. Similarly, in another part titled “Photo,” the camera becomes the device which unveils Tomie’s disfigured and monstrous body as it shows ghostly body parts protruding out of her organs. This representation of the human body through forces of technology reveals the misgivings of a collective cultural consciousness. The gaze of the camera and the x-ray machine, both forms of imaging, materialize the human body as a monstrous entity. At the same time, they point towards the impossibility of imagining the self as a unified entity. Quite the contrary, the human body is constantly multiplying and proliferating beyond itself, generating an excess which can’t be contained within existing social, cultural, and technological norms. It is this ineffable surplus which resists categorization; it always threatens to spill over and become a site of possibilities and subversion. The impossibility of containing Tomie’s existence in material or abstract terms problematises the idea of a true, original self, giving us instead multiple copies, which can regenerate endlessly. Owing to the lack of her concrete identity, Tomie assumes the qualities of the postmodern simulacrum, while also gesturing towards the potential of a post-human subjectivity.³

In the second book of the *Tomie* series, the attention shifts from technological anxieties to the perversities of human relationships. The story titled “Adopted Daughter” alludes to the misgivings associated with ageing and the unnatural desire to hold on to the vitality of youth. It tells the story of a rich,

manga in Japan. The otaku is predominantly male figure who recedes from reality as his obsession with popular culture becomes debilitating.

- 2 Tsutomu Miyazaki was dubbed the cartoon-loving “Otaku Killer” upon the discovery of his extensive collection of porn and horror tapes. Miyazaki raped and murdered four young Japanese girls and media outlets suggested that his homicidal and psychopathic tendencies could be attributed to his detachment from the society, in turn caused by his excessive obsession with manga and other forms of popular entertainment. It was suspected that he engaged in pedophilia and necrophilia and the case cause widespread moral panic and growing unease around the figure of the *otaku* in Japan.
- 3 The simulacra signifies both the aspect of the spectacle and something which exists without an original. See Baudrillard *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1981. For a nuanced understanding of the post-human subjectivity, see N. Katherine Hayles, *How we Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, 1999.

old, and childless couple who have adopted several girl children, but they all die under mysterious circumstances. When Tomie arrives at their doorstep as a recently orphaned teenager, she elicits the devouring and monstrous facet of the old parents as they are driven to literally consume the vigour of her youthful body. Strictly speaking, Tomie is the unnatural demonic being owing to her ability to regenerate; however, she becomes a mirror through which the grotesqueness of the human body and its processes are made visible. As a result, the myth of the 'natural' human body and behaviour is questioned by employing Tomie's unnaturalness strategically in each of the narratives. Another story titled "Boy" brings to light the perversity of the relationship between mother and child, as a young boy becomes frantically obsessed with Tomie and is convinced that she is her mother. As a result of this paranoia, he abandons his biological mother and is driven to murder a young man.

Therefore, each serial rendition of Tomie is marked by proliferation at every level. To begin with, there is the obvious proliferation of Tomie herself as she is reborn in different avatars. Even as the stories can be called formulaic in their plot structure, they are still able to offer something new to the readers. They allow them to confront different forms of anxieties and uncertainties related to their cultural landscape or the essential human condition. This uncomfortable mediation is facilitated by the excess generated by Tomie's unnaturalness which can't be contained within any material structures or even within traditional modes of storytelling. With respect to the latter, it is worth noting that *Tomie* also departs from classic Shōjo manga tropes. As a sub-genre that targets an adolescent female audience, Shōjo manga employs several formal devices to encourage emotional engagement. As a result, it frequently features full-body portraits of young teens, and often focuses on enlarged eyes to convey feelings (Shamoon 2015, 116). It also follows the traditional Japanese *kawaii* aesthetic, wherein female bodies are presented in a desirable and charming light. Ito uses these classical tropes to achieve a different sort of affective involvement. For instance, the manga has several full-body portraits of Tomie which are characteristically grotesque and macabre. Besides shocking the readers, such images also comment on the unnaturalness of the hyper-sexualised female adolescent body. What is being conveyed here is not simply the monstrosity of Tomie's body but also of society's fetishization of the female body.

Therefore, both in terms of the range of issues manifested and the generic possibilities generated through the serial episodes, Tomie resists repetitive uniformity. The excess which signifies her physical self becomes symbolic of the potentialities of the text itself. Even as a similar pattern⁴ is followed in different

4 Interestingly, serial killing itself is often associated with an excess in terms of ritual or the pres-

stories, they become fertile grounds for articulating distinct modes of socio-cultural critique. At the same time, it also creates new representational practices by subverting established genres like *shojo* manga and experimenting with the formal devices of comic storytelling. While developing a theory of popular seriality, Frank Kelleter argues that serial narratives are characterized by genre profusion and genre diversity. According to Kelleter, the serial aesthetic encourages continuations, spin-offs, revisions, subgenres etc. as means to accommodate diegetic overflow. This form of active proliferation also impacts the narrative trajectory of the source of the series itself, oftentimes making it difficult to locate the original in definitive terms. The rich and constantly proliferating interpretations of *Tomie* can also be understood within the context of an overflow supported by seriality, and the aesthetic associated with it. Owing to this, the text assumes a palimpsestic quality and *Tomie* becomes a signifier with endless possibilities. This also calls into question the very idea of the original and forces us to reformulate the relationship between the constituent elements of a serial narrative. Is there an original story which is rehashed in multiple ways to create serial episodes or narratives? Does this original remain untouched and unchanged as the series develops or do more recent versions rewrite the original?

The relationship between an 'original' phenomenon and its copies is one that has been theorized extensively in postmodern philosophy. Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum denotes a stage in postmodernism where representation precedes and determines the real. In this case, the imitation has lost all touch with the original and replaces it. Baudrillard uses a vocabulary of loss and nihilism to explain the ramifications of an age defined by the simulacrum.⁵ However, Gilles Deleuze locates the simulacrum in a realm of theoretical possibilities. According to Deleuze, the simulacrum is a copy without a resemblance and therefore, it cannot be defined with respect to the original model. Severing the bond between the original and the simulacrum, liberates the latter, "The simulacrum is not degraded copy, rather it contains a positive power which negates both original and copy, both model and reproduction" (1983, 53). Deleuze disavows the pre-determined epistemological hierarchy between the original and the copy; instead, all versions are seen to be different points of view. This is a particularly fascinating framework for reading the multiple

ence of certain signature moves. The criminal act is staged (repeatedly) in a certain manner which eventually becomes a pattern; hence, the seriality and excess are once again informed by one another.

5 See Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994).

simulacral copies of Tomie. The series never suggests that there is one 'original' Tomie but all manifestations are equally original in terms of their critical potential within a narrative. As a matter of fact, readers are told that Tomie will survive through multiplication if there is a single copy of her left in the world. In one of the concluding stories of the series published in 2000, there is only one Tomie left in the world and a character named Ryo encases her in a concrete block to prevent her from self-replicating. Many years later, when he breaks the concrete block, Tomie has miraculously disappeared through some visible cracks along the surface. Once again, this hints towards the impossibility of containing Tomie within any material structures. At the same time, it also suggests that Tomie's multiplicity cannot be reduced to the unitary. In a similar fashion, the elements that constitute a series mutually derive their meaning from each other; they constantly proliferate quantitatively and semantically, reinscribing the earlier reiterations in the process. This continuous revisionary mechanism built into the very formal fabric of the serial model of narration lends it a uniqueness of sorts. The serial aesthetic then is driven by this constant movement and progression, along with the need to add more episodes or stories to the series. This brings us to yet another peculiar feature of the serial aesthetic which will be discussed in detail in the next section—the fraught relationship between perpetuation and closure.

2 Continuity, Closure and Capitalism

The serial model is defined by the perpetuation of different yet similar stories or episodes connected by an overarching plot or narrative. As has been discussed in the earlier section, serial texts often repeat an established formula of storytelling in terms of plot progression and character development. Yet, it also creates an excess, something that spills over the repetitive patterns to produce new meanings and possibilities. However, at the same time, one must remember that seriality is intricately associated with popular culture and popular genres of representation, which are often accused of being formulaic. By virtue of this association, serial texts are also commercial products since they are influenced by forces of supply and demand. With every new instalment, a series is expected to retain existing viewers and attract newer ones, especially in the case of television where the serial model is the dominant narrative form. As a result, the success of a television series is often measured in terms of the number of seasons that are commissioned by networks. In order to function within such parameters, serial texts are often forced to create the necessary conditions for their own renewal, thereby denying or postponing closure. Referring to this

particular dynamic, Kelleter argues that “popular series are structurally geared towards their own renewal. In this manner, they constantly suggest a narrative totality (even to themselves) that is anticipatory by definition because it must remain elusive as long as the series has not yet reached its ending” (2017).

While this logic of perpetuation is ideally driven exclusively by the formal necessities of the serial storytelling model, it becomes impossible to separate it from commercial interests of profit generations. There is a long list of television shows and literary series which are notorious for persisting long past their artistic prime or even cultural relevance simply in order to maximise their revenue collections. Such series are also blamed for exploiting storytelling devices like cliff-hangers to retain audience interest, thereby diluting the aesthetic integrity of the text itself. The serial model is also inherently improvisational in nature since it is possible to get feedback from audiences while the narrative is still being designed. While this facilitates more flexible and richer forms of storytelling, it also allows for deeper involvement of non-artistic factors in all forms of decision-making. Owing to these features, seriality has often been studied within the logic of production and consumption in capitalism. Just like the commodity form both creates and partially fulfils desire within a consumer, the serial form also mimics this capitalist form of production and consumption. David Buxton employs the Marxist concepts of ‘real’ and ‘formal subsumption’ to study the nuances of the serial form and argues that its fundamental coordinates have been reshaped thoroughly by forces of capital.

Formal and real subsumption are differentiated on the basis of the stage at which capitalist relations interfere in the process of production of commodities. When the intervention takes place after the production process which was established prior to capitalist forces, it counts as formal subsumption. However, when capital intervenes right from the beginning and reorganizes the very processes of labour and production, it is classified as real subsumption. Under the latter, the structures of production become thoroughly informed by capitalist relations. Employing this distinction, Buxton argues that the serial model has been subsumed thoroughly by forces of capital since the “consumer is already conceptualized and targeted as an integral part of the production process” (2019, 409). Furthermore, the serial form becomes analogous to the process of capitalist production itself and imitates capitalism in its internal structure as well. If one follows this argument to its logical conclusion, the serial aesthetic will be threatened by a complete overhaul by capitalist forces where it loses any sense of autonomy and becomes entirely subservient to commercial factors. While it is true that the cumulative serial model facilitates a higher degree of external intervention, the last section of the paper will argue that certain literary series are still able to circumvent the subsumptive power of capital forces.

There is a certain excess in the act of repetitive production and consumption of serial texts that allows them to transgress their commodity-like function.

3 Repetition and Enjoyment

It is undeniable that for the serial form to thrive and prosper, it must delay complete closure. In other words, the serial aesthetic relies on the withholding of that final element which will complete the puzzle, so to speak, or provide total satisfaction to the readers. While satiating a part of the reader's curiosity, it simultaneously creates the groundwork for new story arcs. In doing so, it invariably repeats certain established formulas and patterns, because of which, serial forms have often been critiqued for being unoriginal and imitative. As a matter of fact, this is a criticism often levied against popular generic fiction, a lot of which is published in the serial format. For instance, Golden Age detective fiction was so genre-driven that authors were expected to dutifully respect various sets of rules published by other authors and critics. S.S. Van Dine's "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Series" (1928) is an excellent example of the attempt to impose a certain kind of homogeneity in detective fiction. However, despite the repetitiveness at the heart of such fiction (or perhaps because of it), it continued to be immensely popular among readers. Each detective novel of a particular series was expected to have similar plot progression, settings, and kinds of characters. There was always a murder committed under certain circumstances and the figure of the detective employed a specific set of skills to solve the crime. This formula was the backbone of multiple novels released one after the other, yet the uniformity did not deter readers. Conversely, they returned and participated in the process of detection, hoping to outdo the gifted detective in a literary competition of sorts.

Similarly, in the case of *Tomie*, almost all stories begin with a copy of Tomie surfacing under different circumstances, sometimes in an old mansion while other times at a deserted beach. She assumes the role of the *femme fatale* and beguiles innocent characters, often male. Such characters find themselves completely at her mercy as she drives them to perform inhumane acts of violence, and oftentimes, the narrative ends with these characters killing Tomie. The same formula is repeated scrupulously in each rendition of the series under different setting and circumstances. What is it that draws people repeatedly towards the same, repetitive narrative formula? Why do readers return to serial texts despite their predictable denouement? How does one justify the repetitive readings of such texts and the pleasure they afford to readers? In the case of *Tomie*, this issue is further problematized by the obvious gruesomeness on dis-

play. How does the act of repetitive reading/viewing influence the audience's response to such graphic accounts of bodies being mutilated?

In order to answer these pertinent questions, we'll turn to the psychoanalytical concept of "enjoyment" theorized by Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. Expanding on Lacan's work, Žižek has defined enjoyment as the "never-ending, repeated circulation around the unattainable, always missed object" (2001). This unattainable object is of course the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire born out of the inherent lack within the subject. The unattainable nature of this object is born out of its illusory nature since the subject never possessed this idealized state of self-sufficiency in the first place. The lack is only retrospectively produced under restrictions imposed by the symbolic order. Therefore, the desire for the *objet petit a* will continuously be frustrated since it acts as the impediment to its own attainment. However, Žižek argues that the "psychic apparatus finds a sort of perverse pleasure in the displeasure itself," that is, it begins to enjoy the very process of reaching for the unattainable 'lack' knowing that it will never be successful in this endeavour (48). For Lacan, this state of pleasure-in-pain is *jouissance* or enjoyment, while Freud refers to the repetitive impulse as *thanatos* or the "death drive." Significantly, the "death drive" is not the desire to kill oneself, rather it is the compulsion to repeat something endlessly.

Jouissance is often conceptualized as surplus enjoyment, which "operates through repetition: one misses the goal and one repeats the movement, trying again and again, so that the true aim is no longer the intended goal but the repetitive movement itself of attempting to reach it" (Žižek 2017, 8). The pleasure derived from this is essentially a form of excess, even though this was not the goal of the attempt, it is what is produced as surplus. Applying this psychoanalytical framework to our understanding of the popular serial model, readers are constantly denied closure or a definitive climax which would completely satisfy their curiosity, quenching the desire to return to the narrative. Even though they can't achieve this unattainable end, they perform the repetitive act of reading serial narratives and it is this unending return that becomes a source of pleasure for them. This form of enjoyment is a surplus product, not something that was intended by the narrative itself. Herein lies the perversity of this enjoyment, it becomes what it is not supposed to be. The denial of satisfaction is ironically what becomes the supreme source of satisfaction.

One finds this whimsical circle of enjoyment prefigured in the narrative structure of *Tomie* itself. In several stories, Tomie assumes the role of the *femme fatale*, the female seductress who charms men with her sexuality and entraps them. The *femme fatale* became a focal point of study when the second wave feminist critics turned their attention to popular culture and media for rep-

representations of female characters. It was during this phase that Laura Mulvey theorised her now iconic concept of the determining male gaze and how it “projects its fantasy onto the female figure”. Under this framework, women played a “traditional exhibitionist role” and were looked at and displayed in accordance with the fantasies of the male gaze (Mulvey 2009, 19). Some feminist film theorists like Mary Ann Doane suggest that the *femme fatale* also falls victim to the objectifying male gaze and therefore, should not be regarded as a subject of feminism (1991, 3). However, others like E. Ann Kaplan view the *femme fatale* figure as one of resistance as she disrupts social definitions and obstructs the male gaze (1978, 16). Under this understanding, the *femme fatale* becomes a dangerous character associated with a certain kind of unnaturalness and monstrosity. Using a Lacanian reading, Žižek argues that the *femme fatale* embodies the purest form of the death drive by embracing the “radical, most elementary attitude of uncompromising insistence, of ‘not giving away’” (2001, 153). This is evident in how Tomie repeatedly seeks boundless enjoyment in spite of restrictions or taboos from the social order of the Japanese hegemon. Eventually, the male characters are terrified of this unbridled pursuit of pleasure and are often driven to destroy her to cleanse themselves of this affliction. In this manga series, Tomie can be read as the embodiment of this form of compulsive pleasure seeking. She beguiles innocent characters and seeks to fulfil her desires through them.

One must remember that Tomie was originally a victim of a heinous crime and eventually assumes the role of an ominous self-replicating, monstrous adolescent girl. Ironically enough, there is a rich tradition of depicting the female corpse in a grandiose vocabulary of excessive beauty and pleasure. Edgar Allan Poe famously declared that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (1846). This statement is part of a larger tradition which portrays the female dead body as a perfect, immaculate, aesthetic form, solidified into an object of art (Bronfen 1992, 24). In this way, death is subsumed into a larger aesthetic process. Interestingly, Poe’s seemingly puzzling statement also attempts to make death more palatable and pleasurable. Elisabeth Bronfen writes that the “superlative in conjunction with beauty and femininity serves as a figure for an uncanny contradictory relation to death, the translation of anxiety into desire.” (1992, 62). This desire is obviously gendered in nature as the threatening associations of death are being mitigated through the objectification of the female body. In *Tomie*, the original female corpse refuses to be absorbed into this aesthetic scheme of beauty or femininity. This is presumably due to the excess which cannot be contained within an existing vocabulary similar to Poe’s which commutes the decay and degeneration associated with death to a desire for the immaculate

feminine body. Instead of simply becoming an object of desire, Tomie also becomes a subject with unbridled desire, or at least attempts to become one endlessly. Her repetitive self-generation can also be seen as attempts at satisfying a lack within her created by the event of the mutilation of her body. Even as this satisfaction constantly alludes her, she becomes an embodiment of the purest form of surplus enjoyment since she derives pleasure by participating in the act of repetition. Every story of the manga series demonstrates this repetitive cycle as Tomie assumes the role of a seductress and takes complete control over another character's body or/and mind, eventually leading to their death or destruction. The compulsive urge to repeat her existence is an excellent example of Freud's death drive, because unknowingly it also attests to the most popular misunderstanding of the term. In Tomie's case, the compulsion to repeat is attained via her death which triggers another cycle of regeneration. She is the pure subject fully assuming the death drive and ultimately, that's what is truly horrific about her. It becomes impossible to contain this pleasure-in-pain principle since it does the opposite of what it is supposed to do.

The reader of serial narratives is also caught in a similar loop of compulsive repetition leading to unintentional enjoyment. This is one way of understanding the peculiar attraction of the serial form and the hold it seems to have over readers and viewers. Significantly, it can be conceptualised as an excess or a surplus, as something that is produced unexpectedly and is difficult to contain or define using existing vocabulary. Therefore, it is now possible to argue that the *Tomie* series is marked by this sense of excess at multiple levels. At the most obvious level, it is manifested in Tomie's physical self which transgresses the materiality of the human body as it regenerates endlessly. The process of multiplication is represented in particularly gruesome ways, highlighting the abject monstrosity of the human condition itself. The grotesqueness is achieved by superimposing bodily parts or processes on to the normative conception of the body. For instance, in a story titled "Hair", long tresses of hair start growing endlessly from every part of a character's body, while in another story titled "Photo", Tomie's photographs reveal that she has extra organs attached to her body. In these cases, the monstrosity is a product of the excess of hair or organs. In other words, the extra elements threaten the normal order, thereby evoking horror and revulsion from the readers.

Besides the physical surplus of the human body, the formal mode of storytelling also experiments with established conventions of genres. As discussed earlier, the tropes of Shōjo manga are exaggerated to evoke horror as an emotional response from readers. Furthermore, Ito also modifies the shapes and sizes of panels so that they mirror the dismemberment of the body manifested

through them. Such transgressions allow *Tomie* to address a range of socio-cultural and human phenomena in a way that readers are compelled to confront them. Finally, the excess is also a part of the very serial aesthetic espoused by *Tomie*. As a *femme fatale*, Tomie seeks pure enjoyment, untouched by social strictures. This endless pursuit of pleasure is manifested through the compulsive desire to regenerate herself. In a similar vein, the repetitive reading of this manga series affords a perverse form of surplus enjoyment, better understood as Lacanian *jouissance*. The constant denial of closure, a constituent feature of the serial aesthetic, which would traditionally frustrate the readers' desires, ironically produces a condition of enjoyment. This is perhaps the most fundamental excess manifested by *Tomie*, and by serial forms in general, which is marked by its unrelenting nature. This multifarious excess defies expectations and functions in unpredictable ways. As a result, it resists appropriation and embodies a certain degree of perversity. Just like Tomie's body, it spills over, it goes beyond conventional wisdom and expectations and brims with potential and possibilities.

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Caught in Observation: Sublime *tableaux morts* in Female Serial Killer Narratives

Natalia Igl

1 Serial Spectator's Distress and Delight

As readers, viewers or even listeners¹ of a narrative, we are not merely passive recipients of fictional events. We actively partake in their unfolding and most often, in fact, explicitly aim to become deeply involved in them mentally, sensorially, and emotionally: “Both reading and watching are highly embodied activities not only in that we need our senses in order to be able to perceive things, but also in that our bodies act as sounding boards for our mental simulations of storyworlds and of characters’ perceptions, emotions, and actions within those virtual worlds” (Weik von Mossner 2017, 3). Our engagement is directly and measurably (Sukalla et al. 2016) related to embodied mental processes, affective responses and multisensory perceptions, that can induce pleasant as well as distressing psychophysiological reactions and sensations.

Drawing on recent neuroscientific, psychological, and philosophical research on the embodied mind and the crucial interplay of cognition and emotion (Gallagher 2005, Colombetti 2014), Literary and Media Studies have developed a better understanding of the workings of narrative immersion and the cognitive and affective engagement of readers and viewers. Studies such as Gallese and Wojciehowski’s (2011) on ‘How Stories Make us Feel’ or Kukkonen’s (2019) analytical application of cognitive theories to the novel’s historical development of narrative strategies to engage the reader’s mind and body have laid the groundwork to address the double-edged affective potential of engaging with fiction. It shows that the embodied, enactive, and emotional nature of reading or watching fiction provides the basis both for a recipient’s pleasant experience or potential “personal distress” (Keene 2018). For various genres

1 While the present article in generally speaks of ‘readers’ and ‘viewers’ due to its focus on written and filmic narratives, it neither aims to ignore the relevant field of spoken narration in the form of audiobooks or, for that matter, the fact that ‘viewers’ of audio-visual narratives for the most part are also listeners.

such as the thriller, horror, or melodrama, the explicit play on this double bind proves to be of particular importance.

In the case of serial killer narratives, I am arguing that the evocation of “mixed feelings” in the recipient can be seen as crucial to how the reader or viewer is positioned as a serial spectator: someone who gets entangled in the dynamics of distant observation and visceral involvement. By means of two fictional case studies, I will in the following shed light on the features and functioning of this dynamics, and its crucial connection to both the role of the spectator and the act of mutual and perpetual observation in serial killer narratives.

In Chelsea G. Summers’ novel *A Certain Hunger* (2020), the protagonist Dorothy Daniels reflects pointedly on the interplay of delight and distress that comes with being a reader-spectator. With an ironic bow to the history of the confessional, the first person-narrator repeatedly addresses the reader, acknowledging their spatial, emotional, and moral distance outside the story-world as well as their inevitable entanglement in the violent events of the story. Reading functions as a way of witnessing, and as with the case of being an eyewitness of a gruesome event, the reader or viewer of a fictional scenario cannot simply withdraw from being involved.² The reader’s role as a serial spectator and with it the dynamics of distress and delight also often finds its mirror image within a storyworld, not least so in crime narratives. In the following sections, I examine such ‘mirroring’ in the book and television series *Killing Eve* (2017–2020 and 2018–2020). The scenario of an investigator and a killer becoming obsessed and entangled with each other presents a satirical but significant rendition of the serial killer narrative’s linchpin; that is, the reciprocal dependency of a serial murderer and its dependable audience.

2 The Importance of Mixed Feelings

Considering the potential of serial killer narratives to be at once engaging and aversive, there must be certain narrative strategies that avoid inducing such “emphatic personal distress” (Keen 2018, 45) in their readers or viewers that a majority could not stand to sit through the whole story. As my case studies will show, these strategies involve devices that recalibrate the dynamics of the

2 The notion of reading as witnessing draws on the concept of the “embodied reader,” which “is shorthand for a model of the act of reading which takes into account readers’ embodied responses” (Kukkonen 2014, 367), rather than narratological concepts such as Wolfgang Iser’s “implied reader” with its focus on propositional meaning-making.

recipient's experienced distance and proximity to the storyworld throughout the course of the narration. Here is where the notion of "mixed feelings" comes into play.

It is safe to say that readers and viewers engage with narratives, including serial killer narratives, not least for pleasure (Mangen 2006, Nell 1988). Pleasure, however, is a rather blurry concept referring to a complex emotional reaction and state that is elicited by various and contrary situations. Moreover, as Keen (2018, 44) rightfully emphasises "[n]ot all narratives aim to induce pleasure, as narrative theorists since Aristotle have understood."³

That said, it is important not to equate narrative pleasure with the absence of negative emotions. As Menninghaus et al. (2017) argue, negative emotions are experienced to significant degrees during the reception of art and fiction and constitute "valuable resources for the arts (rather than mere antidotes to be tamed or converted)" (46). The clue for "a pleasurable interplay of positive and negative emotions" (8) in narrative engagement thus lies in the specific "psychological distancing mechanisms that are activated along with the cognitive schemata of art, representation, and fiction" (1). These mechanisms make it possible for recipients to maintain a feeling of personal safety and control, providing the cognitive and emotional basis "to positively embrace the experiencing of negative emotions, thereby rendering art reception more intense, more interesting, more emotionally moving, more profound, and occasionally even more beautiful." Based on this model, the embedding of negative emotions into "mixed emotions" allows for the former to contribute significantly to the overall enjoyment of a narrative.⁴

This perspective on "mixed emotions" manifesting through a dynamic interplay of positive and negative emotional responses draws explicitly on Immanuel Kant's reasoning on what makes theatre so enticing to the audience. According to Kant, the answer lies in the dynamic unfolding of difficulties and the evocation of "anxiety and perplexity between hope and joy—so that *the interplay of opposite feelings* sets the mind of the spectator in motion" (Kant 1996 [1789], 232; from Menninghaus et al. 2017, 8, their emphasis). One of the most striking framing phenomena of aesthetic pleasure based on such an interplay

3 See Koopman (2015) on the potential of heightened emotional reading experiences, specifically reading texts on suffering.

4 While Menninghaus et al. (2017) face criticism in some respects (44–51), their point of departure regarding the mediating function of cognitive schemata and frames is unquestionable. Approaching an object or event under the conceptual frame of art or fiction crucially influences "what we perceive and how we perceive things" (Quendler 2010, 9; see also Igl 2019, 100–101).

of emotions has come to be known under the name of the 'sublime'. As Kant argues in his account on the phenomenon in *Critique of Judgment* (*Critik der Urtheilskraft*, 1790), being confronted with the greatness and forcefulness of nature can evoke terror but also our awe (Kant 1987 [1790], § 26–29, 107–126). The crucial point for us to experience a display of nature's overwhelming vastness or power as sublime is that it "must not have any actual power over us, lest we feel not pleasurable but real fear" (Gross 2018, 9; Kant 1987 [1790], § 28, 121).

In the case of fiction, this condition is always potentially fulfilled. For it to be realised in actuality, a scenario needs to be flagged *as* fiction. The staging of a *murderous sublime*—understood here as (the result of) a scenario in which a character, presented as beyond social and ethical restraints, carries out violent acts of killing in an aestheticised way—in the case of serial killer narratives is based on a dynamic play on making recipients feel safely distanced as well as (emotionally) dangerously close to the action. How is this achieved? While fiction acts as a general mediator on the 'outermost' level of a narrative, textual or audio-visual framing strategies allow for a dynamic handling of the reader or viewer's perceived distance and proximity to the storyworld (Igl 2019). In *A Certain Hunger* this dynamic handling is based on the interplay of the distancing observer-perspective provided by the genre frame of the epistolary novel and the confessional on the one hand, and plot-focused sequences of intensely visceral imagery on the other. In the transmedial storyworld (Ryan and Thon 2014) of *Killing Eve*, the action-driven plot—clearly targeted at an immersive experience for the reader or viewer—is traversed throughout by a distance-inducing meta-perspectival recursive structure where the reader/viewer is the "observer of observed observers."⁵

Both *A Certain Hunger* and *Killing Eve* utilise a specific narrative device to manage the dynamics of distance and proximity. They present their constitutive scenes of ferocious killings 'framed' as *tableaux morts* that equally *enact* the violence in a close-up and confront the recipient with potentially distressing perceptual and affective cues through intense imagery. In this way, they *confine* the violence onto a canvas or screen that the reader or viewer approaches as spectator from a safe distance. Although there is no parallel tradition of the *tableau mort* in performative arts like the *tableau vivant*—the arranging of one or several persons to create a living picture—the theme of death has of course been of crucial importance within the history of textual and visual media. Against this backdrop, Griffiths (2014) quite fittingly refers

5 See Igl (2016) on how narratives utilise the potential for recursive embedding of perspectival stances within narrative discourse to create a dynamic reading experience of shifting between distance and proximity.

to a visual culture of “spectacularized executions” (1) within American cinematic history under the heading of *tableaux morts*. While Griffiths’ historical contextualisation of the cinematic genre of execution films, drawing inter alia on Foucault (1995), focuses on the “rich, macabre visual culture” that evolved around the different forms and practices of capital punishment and has been visually “recorded in artworks, woodcuts, paintings, drawings, photographs, lithographs, and motion pictures” (Griffiths 2014, 1), the realm of literature must be seen as equally crucial in contributing to the cultural imagery of scenes of violence and death painted in words. In contrast to the ‘living picture’ which allows its actors to remain living agents after the *mise en scène*, the *tableau mort* is—at least in most cases including in my examples of analysis—tantamount to their final scene.

3 Persistent Female Violence in *A Certain Hunger*

While serial killers do inhabit “the interlocking genres of the thriller and true crime,” they also are “self-aware subjects who actively engage in their own self-representation,” as Gomel (2003, 33) points out. Against this backdrop, the persistent popularity of serial killer narratives (Jones 2020) offers us insight in the complex links between fiction and factual reality as well as the interplay of agency and representation. Drawing on Gomel’s (2003) suggestion to look at fictional representations of violence not as cause of factual violence but rather “as a post factum defense against it” (33), I want to argue for the dual nature of serial killer narratives. In its mainstream form, the serial killer as a cultural construct largely reinforces reactionary sentiments in presenting the figure as a monstrous aberration within an otherwise sound and orderly society (Jones 2020, 3). Though appearing as extraordinary and socially transgressive, the serial killer thus precisely functions as a norm-stabilizing construct and as such is stereotypically depicted as white and male, their victims predominantly as vulnerable subjects like children, women, gender non-conforming or in different (additional) aspects marginalised persons. At its core, the serial killer narrative reinforces gender-binarity and patriarchal notions of agency, as Jones emphasises: “The disproportionate sensationalism around serial murder constitutes a form of discipline over the female subject, who is most regularly depicted as victim” (4).

However, there is a subversive potential to serial killer narratives. Within a (factual) world that attributes, and to a large degree condones, violence as a masculine trait, “killing by women violates norms of femininity, such as nurturance, gentleness and social conformity. It disturbs culturally held

notions not only of how women should behave, but also of what a woman is" (Seal 2010, 1). Against this background, female serial killer narratives possess a particular potential to negotiate and defy gendered expectations in characters regarding, for example, their morals and motivations as well as their scope of agency. What is more, they can challenge the gender-stereotypical, sensationalist-exploitative, and consumption-oriented nature of serial killer narratives itself. In an essay titled "Why the Serial Killer Novel is the New Feminist Fiction" Chelsea G. Summers puts it in a nutshell:

I am a violent woman. I am also, alas, a moral woman. This is a conflict, but the conflict between being a human with a will to rampage and one with a deep moral compass is secondary. The real conflict is that of being a female human loaded with all the cultural trappings of femininity and being a person with an anger issue. Anger in a man is acceptable. Anger from a woman is frightening, alarming, even destabilizing. Boys will be boys, and men will be violent, but there's little societal room to indulge, excuse, or even express those feelings in women. (Summers 2020b)

In fiction, female violence hardly ever appears as an indulgence. If it is represented at all, it is mostly shown as an aberration, as resulting from manipulation by a third (often male) party or as scenario of a victim turned perpetrator. Summers' essay emphasises the fact that the serial killer genre's subversive potential is closely connected to its extensive representation of violence. Serial killer narratives can work as "the new feminist fiction" precisely due to their genre-typical representation of violent conduct in form of aestheticised acts, carried out by complex, fully-fledged characters with agency and an urge to be seen. Unsurprisingly, Summers' novel reads as a satirical meta-commentary on the notion of the stereotypically male psychopathic, cannibalistic serial killer as a pop culture icon (Grixti 1995). The novel's protagonist and narrator Dorothy Daniels, first food critic and then confessional writer, offers a feminist deconstruction of the notion of the murderous sublime: "As a woman psychopath, the white tiger of human psychological deviance, I am a wonder, and I relish your awe." (Summers 2020a, 26)

Although the character's scope for action is crucially diminished, being a convicted serial murderer imprisoned for life, her agency seems to be unabated. Reflecting on her status as an object of scientific interest in a topical sequence in the second chapter, the narrator defies the scrutinizing observer's stereotypical 'male gaze' with its notorious hierarchy between the spectator—conceptualised as 'male', dominant, and equipped with agency—and his object of observation that by definition lacks the listed attributes:

It didn't take long for the forensic psychology and criminal justice students to start fluttering to me, like common grey moths to a bonfire. Two weeks after I'd landed as Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, and I'd received my first interview request from a Ph.D. candidate. One request became two, then three, then more. Like hail dropping from the sky, eager students fell before me, jostling each other for my attention. [...] The students were mostly thirty-year-olds, who, irrespective of gender, wore studious glasses and the kind of asexual, atonal clothing that functions like mental saltpeter. But I've always found that being the center of attention is an implicitly erotic state, and I spread my exotic wings under the students' bland collective gaze. The Hawthorne effect is real—as I was observed, my behavior changed, not always innocently. (Summers 2020a, 24)

By enjoying the “erotic state” of being the object of attention and observance, the narrator sabotages both the distinction of observer and observed and the potential results of the scientific examination. The reference to the Hawthorne effect, signifying the phenomenon that the behaviour of a study's subjects alter due to their awareness of being observed, adds emphasis on the fact that the narrator is still in charge and acts as a meta-observer in her own right. The narrator's agency manifests further in her ability to cater to her observers' expectations, thus sustaining their interest to keep observing and their illusion of being in control. By this, she turns her professionally distanced observers into an eager and entangled audience, oblivious that all the answers they seek to gain through scientific study are already owned by their supposed subject of study. Knowing that “the students' interest in me was in direct proportion to how well I conformed to their prepackaged expectations” (Summers 2020a, 24–25), the narrator enjoys her “place in the limited limelight” (25) and acts her role accordingly to extend the pleasurable play.

As the reader experiences throughout the narrative, Dorothy Daniels—as protagonist as well as narrator—presents herself as an expertly observer and evaluator, equally diligent in her capacity of a food critic as in her role of a serial murderer. Transferring the relentless rigour of her food writing onto her confession narrative, the narrator functions as the reader's resolute mediator and mentor to become a persistent serial spectator themselves, not sparing them the “gruesome details” of seeing “how the sausage gets made”:

You'd likely enjoy if I stopped narrating this chapter at this precise moment. You—comfortable in your chair, snug in your bed, rocking somnolent on the train, curved around your Kindle, or propping your volume

open in your splayed hands—probably are making a silent wish for me to table the gruesome details. You're tempted to thumb ahead, to skip this section where I detail the skinning, gutting, stripping, and slicing of his corpse that once was my living, breathing, ejaculating lover.

It's for your own good that I tell these bits. It's for your own good that you hear them. You've come too far not to see how the sausage gets made, metaphorically speaking, of course. (Summers 2020a, 170)

A reader, comfortably positioned as an outside observer, may, in theory, enjoy following the killer's doings without feeling morally involved, keeping the potential emotional distress of depictions of violence at a distance. As outlined above, though, the process of reading is highly embodied and enactive, evoking intense multisensory imagery⁶ via linguistic cues. Thus, the actual process of reading implies that a reader, equipped with an embodied mind, processes the narrated events in a way that turns the seemingly distanced act of observing into an enactive scenario of witnessing. At this, the narrator's direct address to the narratee as cited above can be seen as a highly effective tool. As Rembowska-Pluciennik (2018) argues, "second-person narrative stimulates a specific mode of reader involvement, rooted in participation rather than immersion" (159) and evokes a scenario "of co-acting and co-thinking" (171) between narrator and narratee.

Somewhat ironically, the four pages preceding the quoted passage narrate in detail the slicing of the killer's former lover's throat, the pouring of blood, the difficulties of attaching the dead body onto a meat hook, etc.—all interwoven with meditations on the art and history of butchering. Against this backdrop, the passage of direct reader address can be read as a functionalisation of a trigger warning-like cue of distancing. This is also accomplished through narrative meta-commentary, signalling the following of a particularly salient passage of narrative involvement, thus adding to the chapter's overall narrative 'mesh' of strategies to evoke distance and proximity. In the following key sequence, the focus shifts onto the plot-level, that is onto the visceral process of skinning and gutting and stripping and slicing. This process is carried out and narrated with the announced devotion to detail, not only with regard to the reader's virtual eye, but especially to the reader's olfactory sense—a sense that cannot be turned off voluntarily:

6 The notion of imagery in the sense of the perceived vividness of a literary narrative during the reading process is taken in a broader meaning here and, in accordance with Kuzmičová (2012, 26), understood as not restricted to visual imagery, but as a multisensory, embodied, embedded, and enactive phenomenon.

You can read the statistic that the human body holds twenty-five feet of intestines, but until you see it in all its red-white-and-blue glory, you can't envision it. Twenty-five feet is a lot of intestines, and I was awash. The pulsating, ferocious smell of innards pressed and throbbed in my throat. I pushed snaking lines of slippery viscera to the side, winding some around the nearby jigsaw. The guts smelled like raw Haggis—no, let me rephrase: the air smelled like atavistic lust and honor and jubilation and ecstasy. It was awesome, in the Old Testament sense of the word. It was sublime, in the classic sense of Edmund Burke. It was a sharp, bestial, acrid, and mineral smell, one that wed shit and blood and loins and spit in the most holy of matrimonies. If I'd time, I'd have stripped naked and rolled around in it. (Summers 2020a, 171)

Edmund Burke's specific and highly influential notion of the sublime, pivotally developed in his treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757/59), differs from Kant's subsequent conceptualisation in various respects. One of Burke's treatise's most prominent aspects is "its promotion of an aesthetic of terror—indeed, it is one of the mainsprings of the gothic novel and the horror genre" (Doran 2015, 141). The serial killer narrative's evocation of a murderous sublime has to be seen in this line of tradition, as *A Certain Hunger*'s narrator rightfully insinuates in her meta-commentary.

The "blood and guts" sequence cited above also proves crucial with respect to its dynamic handling of the readers' perception of distance and proximity to the storyworld. On the one hand, the sequence's direct address to the reader equally positions them as onlookers observing the scene from a certain distance; through its salient language and evoked imagery it holds the readers' attention, on the other hand, and forces them to keep 'watching'. The scene thus functions as a virtual and visceral *tableau mort*. It presents the agency of its murderous creator at once as a Burkian 'sublime terror' and as the authority to judge what the readers need to "see with their own eyes." You cannot be "book smart" when it comes to experiencing the murderous sublime. In this way, as I argue, the device of the *tableau mort* allows the reader to dynamically shift back and forth between the role of a safely distanced observer and an *enactive* scenario of *witnessing*. At the higher level of the narrative as a whole, the strategy of creating these dynamically functionalised *tableaux* also serves another purpose, namely as the serial killer's archival legacy of—in more than one sense—moving images:

One murder, then another, then another, then another. In my history, murder comes easy in links. Bodies fell, connected like sausages, like syn-

tax, like film stills. View each in focus, move them quickly, and you see a facsimile of motion. Look at them one at a time, and there's the comfortable fiction of stasis. Neither movement nor stasis is more true—like a photo of mountains snapped from a car rocketing down a highway, both movement and stillness are equally true. Life erupts with contradictions, and we contain multitudes—in my case, quite literally, as I've eaten them. (Summers 2020a, 92)

While this text passage evokes a connection between the *tableau mort* and the cinematic principle of images in movement or “motion picture,” it also links back to the narrator's mention of the Hawthorne effect cited further above: “as I was observed, my behavior changed” (Summers 2020a, 24). The direct reference to the sociological observer paradox in the earlier text passage is thus followed up by the allusion to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle: “Neither movement nor stasis is more true” (92). Returning to Gommel's (2003) note on factual serial killers as “self-aware subjects who actively engage in their own self-representation” (33), we can read *A Certain Hunger*'s narrator's reflections on the relativity of perspective and personal agency precisely as part of the meta-observation that the novel as a medium affords. The serial killer in Summers' novel is, as the reader learns from Dorothy Daniels' narrative, not merely killing for her own (cannibalistic) pleasure, but also to tell the tale and create the lasting archive as a means of active self-representation: “I write this knowing that I will grow old and die in this prison, and I write this so that no one will forget me. I have carved my place in your memory, cut to the quick of American consciousness. How many women—hungry as we are for immutability—can say the same?” (Summers 2020a, 251)

The killer's agency, however, proves not to be unconditional, as the narrator's self-aware reflection emphasises; it needs a persistent audience, just as the confessional voice needs someone who listens. By means of killing and incorporating her victims, *A Certain Hunger*'s murderous heroine does not merely create a memorable story, but also herself as a memorable individual with an immutable voice—a *tableau vivant* engraved in the reader's memory, created out of a series of sublime *tableaux morts*.

4 Entangled Observers in *Killing Eve*

Like its novelistic basis, the spy thriller trilogy by Luke Jennings (2017, 2018, 2020), the television series *Killing Eve* (2018–2022) interweaves its serial killer theme with the gruesomely colourful threads of postmodern black comedy.

The narrative revolves around Villanelle and Eve Polastri, the former a “psychopathic” woman recruited in a Russian prison and turned assassin for the obscure shadow organisation “The Twelve,” the latter a M15 desk officer turned unofficial M16 agent. Jennings’ trilogy builds on the tradition of British spy thrillers that shifted the setting from a local to an international perspective after the Second World War (McCracken 2004, 619–620). In this genre tradition, “the British spy was a trickster, less powerful than his counterparts in either the United States or the Soviet Union, but cleverer, and able to win respect for his experience and abilities” (620). Although the topos of the spy as trickster is certainly evoked within the transmedial storyworld of *Killing Eve*, it is mostly being satirically subverted.

Eve’s character is presented as smart and tenacious, but also as obsessive over Villanelle. Her willingness to embrace the role of a serial spectator receives particular emphasis in the television rendition of the narrative’s central motif of a predator and prey’s mutual obsession. In the beginning of the first season, Eve Polastri is confronted by her superior about her ‘side project’ of creating an unauthorised compilation of data on female assassins on her M15 computer. While she at first tries to stutteringly justify this as motivated by a plausible professional interest, she ends up confessing her personal devotion and that she is, after all, “just a fan” (Waller-Bridge 2018). Departing from the genre tradition, it is not the spy but the assassin who holds the trickster-role in *Killing Eve*. Villanelle is a mischievous heroine who exists and acts beyond the restrictive notions of good and evil, a master in the art of the murderous sublime.

Although agency and scope of vision are distributed unevenly with respect to the different characters of the narrative, the observer-role is nonetheless ubiquitous. In accordance with the genre expectations of a spy thriller, everyone seems to be watching everyone. Likewise, everyone’s field of vision is to a greater or lesser extent obstructed. In this respect, crime fiction as a genre can be seen as a virtual training area for the reader to act as an as observer and to be self-conscious about this role. As with the broader genre of the detective novel, the spy novel trains the reader in observing the unfolding of an increasingly complex meshwork of connections and (secret) agents, in detecting the clues to solve the mystery or conspiracy.⁷ It also trains the reader in monitoring

7 The history and success of the serial killer narrative as a subgenre has to be considered within the bigger picture of the establishment and development of nineteenth-century crime fiction. As Worthington (2005, 1–2) points out, crime fiction has its origins in the periodical press and the broadsides; that is, in “cheap, single sheets of paper printed on one side only and avail-

their own role as a spectator who shares the characters' fate of being repeatedly deceived and subjected to sudden turns of events.⁸ Seen in this context, *Killing Eve*'s eponymous character Eve Polastri does not merely function as Villanelle's antagonist, but also as an unmistakable mirror figure of the reader or viewer. This is both with respect to the recipient's equal fate of being deceived and of being caught in a persistent process of observation.

Villanelle's identity as a hired assassin still matches that of a serial killer. As an exceptional and extraordinary being, a superior agent who is above society's moral and judicial codes of conduct, addressed by her handler as either "an instrument of destiny" (Jennings 2018, 66) or "predator, an instrument of evolution" (Jennings 2017, 30), she sees herself as one of those, "to whom no moral law applied." While her "observational ability, sensory skills and reactive speeds" (Jennings 2017, 22) have been perfected through training, her 'abnormal' psychological disposition is what makes her "invulnerable" in the first place: "[S]he had always known that she was different from those around her. She felt none of the things they felt. Where others would experience pain or horror, she knew only a frozen dispassion. She had learned to imitate the emotional responses of others—their fears, their uncertainties, their desperate need for affection—but she had never fully experienced them." (Jennings 2017, 22)

In accordance with the Anglo-American cultural construction of a serial killer, Villanelle is presented as psychopathic—stereotypically so in the novels and more as a meta-fictional ironic display in the television series—, as lacking the ability to feel empathy and depending on persistent observation of her opposite's affective expressions and studied responses. Again, in line with the stereotype, this deviation from the norm enables the character's exceptionality and amoral superiority. Her trickster-like nature implies that she possesses a level of agency that ultimately also defies her masters. In the television series, this defiance is foregrounded through an interplay of plot events, the character's *mise en scène* as mischievous villain, and the matching upbeat soundtrack that adds another layer of ironic commentary. In the book series, sequences such as the following meta-fictional innuendo remind the other characters and the reader alike that Villanelle is ultimately her own agent: "[...] All this drama

able to a wide and socially disparate audience" (2). Accordingly, its development has to be read against the backdrop of its connection with seriality and the periodical press's role in training readers in new ways of seeing.

8 Returning to the question of narrative pleasure, this type of deception does not imply a negative reading or viewing experience. Revelatory plots can, on the contrary, be highly rewarding for the recipient, cognitively delighted by a "well-made surprise" (Tobin 2018).

you create. Speedboats, made-up aristocratic titles, exploding dildos ... You're not living in a fucking TV series, Villanelle.' 'Really? I thought I was.'" (Jennings 2018, 194)

Drama is not the only thing Villanelle creates. Similar to Dorothy Daniels in *A Certain Hunger*, Villanelle is not merely a killer but also a skilful and meticulous composer of dramatic, sometimes grotesque and always spectacular *tableaux morts*. In both cases, the material's unruly agency due to the victim's behaviour or their mortal body's physical constitution tends to challenge the murdering artist's process and mastery, adding to the scenarios' overall character of visceral involvement. While *A Certain Hunger's* murdering food critic has to handle the "troublesome" (Summers 2020a, 136) dead bodies of her male victims in difficult environments—be it the open waters of the Atlantic ocean (134–137) or a Roman slaughterhouse with its appliances designed to be operated by "big beefy men" (169)—, *Killing Eve's* (novelistic) killing heroine becomes inadvertently part of her own murderous composition of the "Franco-Dutch Nazi killed by an exploding dildo" *tableau* (Jennings 2018, 178).

In the spirit of the spy novel's cat-and-mouse play and inclination towards deceit, the device of the *tableau mort* within the *Killing Eve* book series even allows for the elaborate staging of the violent deaths of Eve at the end of the second novel (Jennings 2018, 238–243) and of Villanelle/Oxana in a double-play stunt at the end of the third (Jennings 2020, 209–210). While the illusion of Eve's staged demise proves only temporary, the final *tableau vivant* of a *tableau mort* seems to literally do the trick. Marking the narrative's final transition into a romance novel happy ending, Villanelle's symbolic death seems to allow for the former mutually obsessed killer and her victim to transform into "just two women gazing out over the frozen Neva river, in the fading light of a Russian winter afternoon." (Jennings 2020, 228)

In comparison to this melodramatic twist of the spy novel genre, the television series *Killing Eve* is more inclined towards a continual play on ambiguity and instability. The final confrontation and juxtaposition of Villanelle and Eve in the third season's last episode, suitably titled "Are You Leading or Am I?" (Heathcote and Neal 2020), is staged as a topical meeting on Tower Bridge, which, in its symmetrical architecture and Victorian Gothic style is not only one of London's distinctive landmarks but also a bascule bridge. As such, it manifests both the transgressive and liminal nature of the two characters' encounter and the possibility to detach and depart from one another. As the sequence unfolds, however, it becomes clear to the viewer that the mutual desire to uphold the (obsessive) connection and observe the other is not resolved. Looking back at each other like a respective Orpheus at their Eurydice, both seem

to be bound to follow one another into the underworld (or at least into the narrated space of a fourth season, already announced for 2022).

5 Ethical Boundaries and Aesthetic Openings

Fiction gives us a training area in which to stage, unfold, and make observable those events, motifs, and choices that prove too problematic or too costly to experience and witness in real life. In case of both narratives discussed in this chapter, the readers or viewers may find themselves sympathising with the killer and acknowledging the heightened level of agency that comes with being free from moral bounds. In both cases, they are also prompted by various textual or audio-visual cues to appreciate the audacity and horrendousness of the murderous deeds and their aesthetic potential. However, I want to strike a blow for the potential of female serial killer narratives to engage their readers, viewers, and listeners in more than a mere act of consumption of aestheticised fictional violence. In accordance with the serial killer narrative's fundamental kinship with seriality (Worthington 2005, 1–2), its dynamics are not in favour of a lasting repletion, neither on the side of the storyworld's murderous agent nor on the side of the reader or viewer. As with the serial killer, the serial spectator will not be satisfied by a single serving. The hunger to be seen and the hunger to watch constantly demand new nourishment. Nonetheless, just as a narrative's capacity to elicit negative emotions has an instrumental influence on the overall aesthetic pleasure potentially experienced by a recipient, crime fiction is a highly potent genre when it comes to obtaining aesthetic engagement and meta-reflection.

As Worthington (2005) outlines in her study on the history of crime narratives, the fictional as well as factual discourses about crime and criminality shifted their focus from “simple matter[s] of discovery, confession, and punishment” towards individual and social aspects concerning “the perpetrator of the crime and his or her motive” (2) in the early nineteenth-century. Seen against this historical backdrop, serial killer narratives can be understood as a specific subgenre of crime fiction that allows for sounding out the social boundaries of ethics and justice, as well as individual and cultural-collective limits of empathy. In practice, this may amount to norm-stabilizing serial killer genre fiction. It may also amount to and bring forth more of those narratives that enable readers to observe and reflect on their own process of becoming unethically entangled in the murderous sublime. Female serial killer narratives can utilise an added potential to that matter by subverting the (gender-)stereotypical attributions of agency and spectacularised-exploitative

display of violence of a monstrous (male) “other” against vulnerable (female, non-normative, marginalised, etc.) victims.

In both examples discussed in this chapter, the aesthetic framing of violence in form of *tableaux morts* allows for a dynamic recalibration of the recipients’ (affective) stance and involvement throughout the narrative. As a device that features both cues for immersive imagery and distancing (meta-)observance, it embodies the fundamental bond between affectively entangled consumption and higher level reflection in narrative engagement. The persistent attraction of serial killer narratives may thus lie in their potential to allow the reader or viewer to experience the ambiguity of distress and delight that comes with the role of being an entangled observer—and to reflect upon the sense of agency in (en)actively partaking in handling the dynamics of distant observation and visceral involvement.

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PART 2

Moral Panics and Murderous Sublime



“The Horror in Whitechapel”: Sensational Journalism in the Jack the Ripper Murders

Chen F. Michaeli

In *Victorian News and Newspapers*, historian Lucy Brown asserts that the unique circumstances in which newspapers and magazines “were generally read, and afforded, even by the poorest” at the end of the nineteenth century was brought on due to unique circumstances. Some of these included a novel national system of education, improved standards of lighting through kerosene lamps, and the recent and unfamiliar experience of idleness afforded to train travellers, due to the invention and proliferation of train travel. However, the most important element was the reporters’ realisation that they could and should manipulate their readers by appealing to their, “anxieties in such a way as to focus [them] on public questions.” (Brown 1985, 48). In other words, the press practiced its ability to manipulate its readers by “establish[ing] a link with the reader’s experience and interests” to promote a particular agenda, while also taking into consideration the growing number of readers (95–96).

The Whitechapel Murders in the summer of 1888 would challenge these newfound journalistic tendencies even further. The murders and their element of mystery challenged journalistic conventions and required papers of all genres to readjust accordingly, stretching the limits of Victorian propriety with regards to acceptable published content. In the autumn of 1888, known also as the ‘reign of terror’, five sex workers were murdered. In chronological order, they were Mary Ann Nicholls, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes, and Mary Jane Kelly, each of whom had been widowed or parted from their husbands and forced into sex work according to reports at the time. They were mutilated by a killer whose *modus operandi* earned him the appellation of “Jack the Ripper” by the Victorian press. The brutality of these murders paired with the police’s inability to uncover the assailant’s identity gave these crimes its air of mystery. Most publications exploited this to portray a monstrous fiend who haunted the streets of Whitechapel, while simultaneously fleshing out the era’s socio-economic concerns through reportage. Sensational publications abused the fine line between substantial information and speculation for the sake of selling a ‘good story’, thereby rendering a series of murders into one of modern Western culture’s most compelling urban myths.

The murders generated a journalistic saga that spread to other continents, all papers varying in the extent to which they allowed speculation and facts to bleed into one another. In London, however, the concept of ‘sensational journalism’ was born; a genre that, as this chapter will demonstrate, allowed for the commemoration of Jack the Ripper as a phantom stalking London’s streets and collective Western imagination. I consider three narratological instruments that pertain to these journalistic representations of serial murder, which have allowed the creation of a narrative deeply rooted in cultural memory. First, the visual narrative, which offered an alternative form of storytelling to appeal to a newly semi-literate population in England and the continent. Some of the images I inspect here have shaped Victorian perceptions as well as contemporary cultural memory of the murders. Second, I examine the linguistic choices of the Victorian press, which were meant to bombard readers with intense and repetitive representations of serial violence. I also suggest that some of their key journalistic phrases were borrowed from Victorian crime fiction, and shifted as the brutality of the murders escalated, eventually seeping even into elite newspapers. Lastly, I analyse the reportage’s use of heresy, speculation, and even the supernatural in order to fill in the gaps and embellish the already mysterious series of murders. The chapter will ultimately identify the ways in which the public press crafted a spectacular discourse of pornographic violence, a prospect made possible due to contemporaneous conditions and cultural influences. Since this was the first series of murders to have been recorded and reported in such volumes in the press, Jack the Ripper has been successfully spun into a timeless whodunit mystery.

1 Visual Narratives of ‘Virtuous’ Women

In her extensive book *Intimate Violence and Victorian Print Culture* (2015), Suzanne Rintoul examines representations of sexual violence in a variety of Victorian texts to assess the depiction of battered women in Victorian print culture. Rintoul asserts that violence against female bodies was effaced not only visually but also in the rhetoric of papers targeting higher social classes; acts of violence against women from lower classes were “sensationalized for (their) bizarre levels of cruelty,” while brutality against women of higher social classes was, “merely hinted at” due to conventions of class decorum (Rintoul 2015, 1). unequal treatment of women’s bodies derived from diverging class perceptions of virtue and privacy. In other words, the cultural voyeurism which legitimized objectification of the lower and ‘uncultivated’ classes implied that poor women’s wounded bodies could be a form of spectacular entertainment.

Thus, newspapers that chose to feature illustrations of the murdered women, did so to serve a pornographic urge, as male readers of Victorian Britain, "could hardly avoid fixating on the bodies of the victims ravaged by the phallic knife" (Curtis 2002, 14). However, and oddly enough for the Ripper murders, the photographs from which these illustrations drew inspiration focused mostly on the victim's faces. Except for Mary Kelly's photograph (who was mutilated beyond recognition), all photographs focused on the victims' faces, and "disconcertingly, by fixating on the victim's facial physiognomy, the camera transforms these forensic photographs into pure portraits purged of nearly all crime-scene traces" (Anwer 2014, 434). These photographs of the murdered prostitutes, voyeuristic and intrusive, resembled portraits of sleeping women. Therefore, leading the viewers through "a slight associative legerdemain, and the sleeping women transform into the women who sleep around. The mortuary photographs, in that case, function less as objective documents that supplement textual inventories of violence committed by the ripper and more as an archive profiling streetwalkers" (434).

Therefore, and in order to vindicate these women for socio-political interests, the illustrations inspired by the photographs softened, romanticizes and feminized the victims' facial features. As if passively accepting their victimization, all agency, if there were any, stripped from them. The women were often drawn lying in their coffins and rarely at the crime scene. Next to the illustrations of their angelic forms the newspaper reported brutal details of the murder, along with descriptions of the victims' entrails and injured bodies. Finally, to dramatize the disparity between the violence and the victims, the press continued to refer to the prostitutes as being "fair as a lily," invoking a long tradition of using floral imagery to add virtue to fallen women (Roland 2012, 77). One such example is an image of Mary Ann Nichols from the September 8th *Illustrated Police News* issue, which tells a different narrative than that of the actual reports by introducing a sense of virtue commonly lacking in representations of lower-class women.

In the illustration Nichols' clothes are not "ripped off" (as the report suggests), her hair is not "undone," and her expression is serene. Nichols' body was illustrated as placed in a cushioned coffin (receiving the gentle care a prostitute at the time would have never enjoyed) and thus concealing that which the public craved to see, her brutalized body. The tension between reporting the crime in a grotesque manner while concealing the violence from the public's eye, creates a narrative that martyrizes the victim. The illustration ignores the fact that the written reports describe Nichols as a forty-year-old drunk prostitute, who had been severely mutilated after her death. This served as a crucial narratological element, one in which the poor were victimized and terrorized by a faceless and larger evil force.

Another example of this is a famous illustration named “The Nemesis of Neglect” by John Tenniel, printed in the satirical *Punch Magazine* which commonly targeted lower and middle-class home makers. *Punch Magazine* attempted to, “connect the reader to the familiar [...] for purposes of entertainment” through text and layout, and by publishing, “satire, advertisements, letters to the editor [...] gossip, [...] and reviews” (H. Stam and C. Stam 2008, 315). In other words, they engaged in hearsay, blunt criticism, and allusions to the grotesque through illustrations that were clearly tongue-in-cheek and satiric. Published after the second murder, on the night of September 8th, the illustration portrays a spectral image haunting the impoverished East End, holding a dagger in one hand and feeling its way through the dark with the other. The spectre appears to be stepping over a disfigured corpse lying as its feet. According to Gregg Jon Jones’ historical analysis of the Whitechapel Murders, this particular image embodied the connection made by the media between “the depravity of the East End and the murders to further emphasize the need for [a social] reform” (Jones 2013). This image disregards the murdered victims and chooses to emphasize the horrific element of the crimes rather than sensationalize them.

The next, and arguably most memorable illustration, is *Punch Magazine’s* illustration from October 15th. If in the previous illustration the magazine pointed an accusatory finger at the government’s neglect of disadvantaged populations, *Punch’s* Illustration suggests otherwise; the publication seemed to have accused sensational press. The illustration features a demonic figure, with pointed teeth, ears and nose, plastering sensationalistic posters of the murders and other crimes on the city brick walls. The posters blatantly instruct readers to “READ THE PENNY DREADFUL.” Under the provoking title in the poster there is an image of a male offender having stabbed a woman, lying dead, her eyes and mouth gaped in awe. It was at this early stage that readers and papers alike understood the monumental impact sensational journalism had on the spectacularization and amplification of the murders. The images of the victims, depicting vivid portrayals of violence “belonged to the well-established tradition of prurient or sensation-horror journalism” often targeting lower classes (Curtis 2002). However, examined alongside other widespread illustrations at the time, a narrative of a mysterious, nearly supernatural force emerges, the phantom of social injustice.

2 A Violent ‘Literary’ Discourse

Language manipulation was an essential component in the success of sensational journals, specifically the ephemeral and cheap crime broadsides. For

instance, broadsides such as *The Illustrated Police News*, *The Illustrated London News*, *The Penny Illustrated Paper* were widely distributed in prisons and brothels, though they chose to refrain from using proletarian terms such as 'tarts' or 'prostitutes.' Instead, they favoured the ambiguous term 'unfortunates,' thus tragedizing the victims' state and emphasizing their helplessness. Other publications used "euphemisms as 'fallen women,' 'sister of the abyss,' or 'women of the street,'" terms loosely borrowed from works of literature which the lower classes were unlikely to have known and used (Curtis 2002, 94). Soon enough, journalists began to borrow literary terms to further sensationalize the reports of these crimes.

Another narratological device employed by these tabloids was the repetition of select phrases. One would assume that reading what appeared to be an infinite recursion of the same story, that is a prostitute found brutally murdered and mutilated in a dark alleyway with the perpetrator nowhere to be seen, would tire readers. However, tabloids succeeded in creating and recreating a successful formula that followed a fixed linguistic pattern, while generating adequate horror for the readers. Since the mutilations were too severe to communicate in detail, journalists resorted to overusing certain phrases to convey the extent of the brutality. For instance, the phrase "[cut from] ear to ear" appears 57 times in the *Illustrated Police News* reportage between September 8th 1888 and November 15th 1888, 43 times in the *Illustrated London News* reportage of the same dates, and 46 times in the reportage of *The Penny Illustrated Paper*.

In his study of popular representations of crime in Victorian Britain, Philippe Chassaing contends that expressions such as "ear to ear" were "literary clichés" used in "poor style" prior to these murders (Chassaing 1999). Tabloids thus tapped into an accepted discourse commonly used in their genre of publication on the one hand, but on the other, the frequent use of such expressions signified more than simply resorting to exhausted phrases by default. They systematically repeated and thereby, stressed these expressions to convey specific images of serial violence on the fallen woman's body. Mentioning blood in such broadsides became a redundant and "ubiquitous element" that still played a crucial part in presenting highly visual depictions of the crime scene (Chassaing 1999). The victims were often described as "lying in a pool of blood." But these descriptions were far from "sparse and poor metaphors," as Chassaing puts it. On the contrary, they were intentionally consistent and graphic, desperately striving to paint the horror of these murders using what scant linguistic devices they had at their disposal (Chassaing 1999).

These repetitions did more than bombard their readers. They were used to create a serialized narrative, a pivotal point in sensational journalism. More-

over, the repetitions established continuity and therefore, a reliability that gave the papers authoritative importance. Without establishing a sense of authority and reliable narrative, sensational journalism could not have introduced speculation as facts. To garner this authority, newspapers constantly repeated statements provided by authority figures such as coroner Wayne Baxter, and detective-inspectors Edmund Reid and Frederick Abberline. The cheaper tabloids would also retell inquiries between the coroner and alleged witnesses. However, a closer analysis of the same inspection through different papers reveals discrepancies and ambiguities. One such example is the reports of the October 6th inspection. *The Illustrated Police News* recorded Baxter asking a witness, "If there were singing and dancing going on would you have been likely to have heard the cry of a woman in great distress—a cry of murder, for instance—from the yard?" (October 6th). A review of the same inquest in other publications reveals a difference between them and the *Illustrated Police News's* report.

In an issue published on the same date by *The Framlingham Weekly News*, a sensational broadside similar to the *Illustrated Police News*, this question does not appear, nor is it mentioned on the same date by the *Worcestershire Chronicle*, which was known for covering each inquest meticulously. It is nearly impossible to determine whether the other publications overlooked the coroner's question or whether the *Illustrated Police News* had fabricated it. But this is only one of many such inaccuracies found in the immense body of the reportage. The crucial point is that such ambiguities, inaccuracies, and repetitive depictions of violence all contributed to the air of hysteria that surrounded the murders, the very same atmosphere key to the perpetuation of the murders in popular imagination.

Last but not least is the pornographically detailed portrayal of the injuries, employed when the murders seemed to be spinning out of control. Sensation-horror was generated by, "graphic descriptions of corpses based on eyewitness accounts" as well as "autopsy reports," which were not uncommon even in reports prior to the Whitechapel Murders (Curtis 2002, 75). The tabloids repeated the exact numeric depth and length of injuries and the distance between one injury and another, as well as the organ injured. "Couched in clinical language" which allowed the expression the most violent of actions, these images and the brutality of the mutilations were nearly fetishistic in their accuracy (213). Words such as "viscera" or "mons-veneris" would convey no substance to low-class readers but provided a sense of medical accuracy, and therefore, printing them justified explicit biological explanations of their meaning. While the degree of detail offered to readers varied from one publication to the next, most newspapers alluded to the victims' autopsies. Curtis

mentions that in the autumn of 1888 even the prestigious *Times* "printed almost as much clinical gore culled from the autopsy reports as the mass-circulation penny dailies" (26).

The linguistic and stylistic choices were evidently instrumental in generating sensation, thrill, anticipation, agitation, and horror. Massively read broadsides and their editors were fully aware of their paper's impact, and knowing their readers were gullible and uneducated, they made strategic linguistic choices to peak their readers' curiosity. However, when facts are tweaked in favour of such effects, "it is little wonder that truth often suffers in this kind of environment" (Spencer 2007, xv). Thus, the whodunit was effortlessly sustained by the public as much as by written media.

3 Filling the Gaps

In his chapter concerning the relations between the press and the Whitechapel Murders, Darren Oldridge discusses two journalistic styles. Sensational journalism, he explains, in fact peaked in the late nineteenth century through the popular movement known as 'New Journalism.' Sensational reportage and New Journalism have since been often equated, as the latter, "was characterized by an emphasis on crime and 'sensation', and the willingness of newspapers to campaign on themes deemed important to their readers and the wider public" (Oldridge 2007, 47). However, they differ greatly in their narratorial approach. Sensational news was notorious for attaching its own twists and spins to reported acts of crime, reworking existing stories rather than uncovering new ones. New Journalism, on the other hand, believed in an active investigative approach: their reporters, "roamed the street and back alleys of the metropolis" looking for fresh material, unwilling to compromise for 'space-fillers' (Spencer 2007, 102). While sensational journalism pursued a connection with the public by adjusting its content according to public's changing preferences and interests, New Journalism, "expanded and consolidated the social boundaries and the public sphere" by regarding journalism as social and political activism (Walkowitz 1992, 29). Thus, both forms reported stories concerning and addressed to the public, yet relied on different sources, made different linguistic and narrative decisions, and were published for different purposes.

The 'problem' with New Journalism rose when it came to the Ripper murders. As Stephen Arata asserts in *A Companion to Victorian Literature & Culture*, the reports exhibit, "the ease with which social activism slid into sensationalism when its investigative journalism turned yellow" (Arata 1999, 56). In other

words, when New Journalists failed to uncover fresh information of actual substance and exhausted their methods, they reluctantly turned to speculation and rumours, which at the time seemed to be the only existing leads. All these created a complex relationship between the press and the authorities; each relied on the other's discoveries yet were suspicious of the other's conduct and motives.

Social criticism aside, the press marvelled at the police's shortcomings. Both New and Sensational Journalism highlighted, in their respective ways, the incompetence of the authorities. Sensational Journalism depicted police officers as ever-puzzled, perplexed, moustachioed, pipe-smoking detectives, a literary paradigm of the pensive detective which has been preserved to this day. Meanwhile, New Journalism denounced the Ripper murders as one of the most "ignominious police failures of all time," when, to quote the *Daily Chronicle*, the Metropolitan Police "simply" let "the first city of the world ... lapse into primeval savagery" (Walkowitz 1992, 197). It was then that the journalistic pen was mightier than the police's sword, since the police relied on any new information published in papers, be it factual or pure fabrication.

The main criticism levelled against 'yellow' journalism which remains applicable in the present is its "blurring of fact and fiction" (Curtis 2002, ix). Once the boundary between "sacred facts" and "profane interpretations" is neglected and rendered obsolete, one could no longer distinguish between the two (50). Thus, an intertwined narrative emerged from the acknowledgment of what was known and the speculative expansion of what was not known. An example of such a narrative is relatively easy to track through broadsides at the time, such as the *Illustrated Police News*. These tabloids created depictions of the supposed assassin, some of which were sheer deductions made from random pieces of information. For instance, in a report from September 8th, coroner Baxter remarks that the crimes "evidently had been done by someone who knew where the kidney was." Papers in turn, understood Baxter to have presumed that the murderer was familiar with the human anatomy, and was either a surgeon or the less unlikely, a butcher.

The possibility that the murderer was a butcher led papers at the time to be swayed by contemporaneous anti-Semitic voices and promote an unaccounted rumour that a Jewish *shochet*, John Piser, was the perpetrator. It is impossible to trace who had started these rumours, or whether the papers were reflected existing anti-Semitic hypotheses. Many weekly tabloids circulated the idea that "no Englishman could have perpetrated such a horrible crime ... it must have been done by a Jew" (*East London Observer*, September 15th). The *Illustrated Police News* soon gave the murderer the name "Leather-Apron" and hurried to publish hunches linking this appellation to John Piser, a Jewish Polish

butcher. Despite repetitive statements that no person knew Piser by that name, the tabloid provided a full account of his arrest and investigation (September 15th). Though Piser was acquitted, and the press shifted its focus to explore the possibility that a learned man had committed the crimes, the damage had been done to the Jewish community's reputation, and the belief that a Jew was the murderer nonetheless continued to be entertained by the press until mid-twentieth century, through snide remarks such as renaming the murderer "Jacob the Ripper" (Paul Kneppel 2008, 298).

The second speculation about the murderer as surgeon or doctor was welcomed by the working classes seeking to vindicate their own image as the common perpetrators of street crimes. Walkowitz discusses how this particular speculation highlighted the chasm between the two worlds of the East and West End as it had become generally assumed that "the murders were committed by an upper-class male pervert, possessing rare cunning, intelligence, and genius; and that the perpetrator was most likely a mad syphilitic doctor, a savage/savant, skilled in scientific butchery who took pleasure in the sexual mutilation of the prostitutes he murdered." (Walkowitz 1992, 168). In the hands of the press, the coroner's and fellow surgeons' assumption that the murderer was one of their peers became almost an accepted fact. Furthermore, it deepened the working classes' distrust in the authorities, as they believed there would be an uneven treatment of the perpetrator if he were indeed of higher classes.

These unclear boundaries between wild speculations and significant details misled the working-class readership as well as police officers. Indeed, as Warwick notes, the professional sphere continuously suffered from a slippage between deceptive theories (imaginative, at times) and hard data. Warwick quotes a modern FBI profiler who stated that his agency's nineteenth century antecedents "actually do go back to crime fiction, more than crime fact," through, for example, Arthur Conan Doyle's works, that were consulted for strategic approaches to the solution of various crimes (Warwick 2007, 80). Notably, according to the *Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins*, the British literary critic, Doyle himself was consulted by the police and other individual investigators with regards to the murders. Later, he was even for a short period included in the suspect list. The very choice to incorporate the author in the investigative process, points at the element of fiction attached to the murders.

4 Sensationalist Storytelling for the Masses

In *The Novelty of Newspapers*, Matthew Rubery states that the “transformation of news during the nineteenth century profoundly influenced literary narrative in ways that have yet to be recognized” (Rubery 2009, 4). Indeed, if at the beginning of the century newspapers solely addressed the governing classes, by the turn of the century there was an increased demand for the printed word, resulting in countless publications targeting specific audiences and classes. The ephemerality and abundance of newspapers (especially broadsides and cheaper tabloids) proved to be affluent sources for stories, fancies and *fin de siècle* episodes that have remained prominent in contemporary imagination. Though New Journalism of the 1880’s and 1890’s was “condemned by many novelists for its emphasis on sensationalism and human-interest stories,” it spread the genre of sensationalism, which drew in the curious masses, offering a peephole into the lives and concerns of the lower classes (84).

Sensationalism soon became a genre expressed in three forms of Victorian culture—sensation drama, the sensation novel and sensationalistic journalism. In his chapter examining the relation between these three forms of writing, Dallas Liddle contends that although contemporary scholars consider the last two a, “parallel and complementary project, even in variations on the same cultural theme,” such comparisons “offended [nineteenth century] journalists” (Liddle 2004, 89). It seems that both novelists and journalists resented their mutual association. Offensive or not, the sensation novel and sensationalistic journalism shared and exchanged each other’s core concepts: the sensation novel borrowed a “set of plots, themes, and character types” from sensational reports, which in turn made “the sensation novel so noxious to so many periodical reviewers” (97). Andrew Maunder and Grace Moore assert that eventually, when sensational journalism lacked information and exhausted its investigative leads, it resorted to mimicking the sensation novel’s stylistic literary forms and motifs. Thus, the priority for many writers of successful “true crime” stories was, “to be sure that it contained all the ingredients of a sensation novel” (Maunder & Moore 2004, 6). The classification of the two genres was therefore obscured and limited to the length and formats of their publications. Yet even the latter contrast began to erode when the newspaper presses took to publishing digested versions of their best stories in a separate volume format. For instance, in its September 15th issue the *Illustrated Police News* advertised a two-volume booklet, published and printed by the broadside’s publication:

IMPORTANT NOTICE TO NEWSAGENTS.

Will be Published on MONDAY NEXT September 17th

A New and Thrilling Romance, entitled.

THE WHITECHAPEL MURDERS;

or,

The Mysteries of the East End

This sensational Story fully describes all the details connected with these Diabolical Crimes, and faithfully pictures the Night Horrors of this portion of the Great City

No. 2 will be Given Away with No. 1 in a Handsome Illuminated Wrapper. All Unsold Copies will be Exchanged.

It appears the tabloids not only inspired sensational fiction but also played a crucial part in producing as well as circulating fiction based on the murders. It was in fact the press that pointed out and encouraged the links between its reportage and fiction. For instance, W.T. Stead, editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette* used several allusions to R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In his article titled "Murder, and More to Follow" printed on September 8th 1888, he refers to Jack the Ripper as "A Mr. Hyde of Humanity." Furthermore, Stead described the crime as a "renewed reminder of the potentialities of revolting barbarity which lie latent in man," thus, plainly ignoring the fact that one narrative was a work of fiction and the other a very much real series of murders (Walkowitz 1992, 206).

These connections were made for various reasons, perhaps due to the press' and readers' inability to apprehend the frightening events and, as John Marriot notes in his study of the imaginative geography of the murders, they could only resort, "to comparisons with fictionalized acts of the past" (Marriot 2008, 55). Marriot supports this interpretation by quoting a paragraph from the *Star* published in September 1888, "Nothing so appalling, so devilish, so inhuman—or, rather, human—as the three Whitechapel crimes has ever happened outside the pages of Poe or De Quincey" (55). It was widely acknowledged, even by the press, that the murders had a horror-fiction dimension. Serious publications that addressed a more educated readership covered the events as a dangerous nightmare, removed from reality and similar to speculative fiction, at times neglecting considerations of propriety and their female genteel readers. The sensationalistic publications, on the other hand, appealed to a public more accustomed to these degrees of violence, and as a result were compelled to intensify the levels of gore. The two types of publications created a monster (albeit through separate means) detached from common humanity, which could manipulate the police, press and public.

Tabloids kept the story in the public's thoughts almost until January 1889 (unusually long for ephemeral sensational news), after which they featured a series of reports on the "Unavenged Murders." These reports briefly remarked on the Whitechapel murders, were not illustrated, and were printed on the back of the paper along with advertisements. Thirty years after the murders, the press reported the confessions of a madman who, on his deathbed in a maximum-security asylum, took responsibility for the murders (although he had never been to London); sixty years later they reported on a 'Ripper diary,' and more than a hundred years later a piece of Eddowes' shawl was allegedly found with the perpetrator's DNA.¹ The press continues to revive the Whitechapel Horrors to this day, worldwide news still alludes to the Ripper murders, as in the case of the "Yorkshire Ripper" in Britain and a murderous organized crime group called the "Ripper Crew" in Chicago (both in the 1980s); the Beijing police recently caught a "Chinese Jack the Ripper." Indeed, the nineteenth century press not only successfully spun the murders into a sensational whodunit, but its three-month reportage also slipped between fact and speculations, creating what became timeless consumable crime fiction. As Leonard Matter wrote when, "a journalist cannot sell anything else in London, he can always sell a story about Jack the Ripper" (Matter 1929, 3).

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1 In 2014, a shawl that was assumed to have belonged to Catherine Eddowes was subjected to DNA analysis, and certain stains on it matched one of the suspects at the time, Aaron Kosminski. The case and findings are examined in more detail in Drew Gary's *Jack and the Thames Torso Murders: A New Ripper?* 2019.

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(Wo)Mens Rea: The Strange Case of Anne Perry and Murder of/for/by Women

Anhiti Patnaik

You will always be fond of me. I represent to you all the sins you never had the courage to commit.

The Picture of Dorian Gray, OSCAR WILDE



Anne Perry published *The Cater Street Hangman* in 1979, a novel about a female serial killer set in the time of Victorian London a few years prior to Jack the Ripper. This was her first installation in the popular crime fiction series that features the detective duo Inspector Thomas Pitt and his wife Charlotte. Perry's previous attempts at writing historical romance and fantasy were met with rejection. Somehow, *The Cater Street Hangman*, with its refreshingly authentic reconstruction of nineteenth-century criminality, made the publisher's cut. In it, Perry introduced Charlotte Ellison, a young unmarried aristocrat who harbours a singular fascination with true crime. She devises cunning ways to read the florid details of serial murder in newspapers and develop her interest in crime-solving. Naturally, her father controls what his wife and daughters consume and censors what they converse. Perry has no choice but to retrieve this precocious female detective from the patriarchal confines of her home through the only means possible—marriage. Charlotte falls in love with a lowly constable Thomas Pitt, who nurtures her 'desire' to bring justice to the many female victims in his cases, including Charlotte's own maid. Perry makes it amply clear that the main impulse behind Charlotte's attraction to a police officer is to gain unrestricted access to true crime; her first love. Charlotte Pitt—a neo-Victorian incarnation of Miss Marple or Cordelia Gray—was apparently modelled on Perry's own interest in crime fiction as a reader.

Women have long been masters of domestic noir as Lucy Sussex notes in her book *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. She traces the beginnings of serial crime writing to the works of nineteenth-century

American writers like Metta Fuller Victor and Anna Katherine Green, the English Ellen Wood and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and the Canadian-Australian Mary Fortune, who wrote over 500 detective stories in serial magazines. This trend originated when, “The female sleuth was a trope that expressed anxieties about women’s changing roles, and parallels could be drawn with the lives of the authors themselves. Both writer woman and woman written were intertwined” (Sussex 2010, 4). With case studies like Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* and Liane Moriarty’s *Big Little Lies*, that have been adapted into a high-grossing film and television series respectively, Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton’s volume *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction* shows how the female-centric themes of Victorian and Golden Age detective fiction endure in contemporary crime writing by and for women. Anne Perry, who started out in the respectably ‘feminine’ genre of the domestic noir—wherein the home and hearth conceal gruesome sins and crimes—expanded her oeuvre to include darker themes. In her 1990 novel *The Face of a Stranger*, for instance, the hard-boiled detective William Monk can’t remember if he himself is the murderer. But the publisher insisted that the plot’s amorality be discarded in favour of a formulaic dénouement.¹

This editorial decision could not have been timelier, as only four years later her readers discovered that Anne Perry was convicted of murder as a child in 1954 at Christchurch, New Zealand. While Perry was pushing the boundaries of good and evil in fiction, her career was disoriented by a key element of the domestic noir—a secret crime from one’s past. The production of Fran Walsh and Peter Jackson’s 1994 film *Heavenly Creatures* brought to light the incredulous fact that Anne Perry was none other than Juliet Hulme, the sociopathic teenager who had conspired with her best friend Pauline Parker and murdered the latter’s mother. There was no dearth of biographical and criminological literature on the Hulme-Parker case, but the reading public had not connected it to Anne Perry. In a bizarrely retrospective peripeteia, a woman who was celebrated for writing murder became notorious for committing murder. Had Perry perhaps, like her own hero Monk, forgotten (or wished to forget) her crime?

1 Perry’s agent Meg Davis remembered the author’s original idea for Monk to discover that, “[h]e did in fact commit the murder and he has got to go underground and then as an underground private investigator he can take hopeless cases and sort them out by other means, so it is actually a very interesting format premise.” But the editor Leona Nevler at Ballantine vetoed the idea completely because, “[She] felt that Americans wouldn’t cope with that kind of darkness, so it had to turn out that he had left the guy for dead but in fact didn’t literally kill him, and weirdly for the Americans that lets him off the hook and everything’s fine.” (Drayton 2013, 9–10).

The very rhetoric of violence Perry had invented to delight her readers was now used to sensationalize the Christchurch murder. Peter Graham in his biography *Anne Perry and the Murder of the Century* describes how the drudging up of her criminal past was, “an absolute unqualified nightmare.” Perry reportedly said, “All I could think about was that my life would fall apart and it might kill my mother. ... I thought I might lose my career, my home ... It seemed so unfair. Everything I had worked so hard to achieve as a decent member of society was threatened” (Loc. 4402).

1 Navigating Motive and Desire in Law and Literature

The aporia of Anne Perry’s identity as a female writer/killer forces one to ask a series of obvious but discomfiting questions about the aesthetics of murder. What is the difference between a female killer committing an act of murder and a female writer representing murder? What distinguishes a female reader who gets triggered by graphic representations of violence from one who consciously consumes true crime narratives for its gratuitous content? What is the onto-epistemological difference between real murder versus fictional murder? Why are female crime fiction writers from Agatha Christie to P.D. James lauded for producing multiple ‘corpses’ in their writing? Why are they not condemned for mimicking the psychopathic compulsion of a serial killer, even as, the female serial killer presents a kind of criminological paradox? Aren’t ‘women’ supposed to be as distanced as possible from this unwholesome matter? What is *woman* if not the statistically shored up cultural imaginary of the always already victim? In this chapter, I will complicate the problem of ‘motive’ in Anne Perry’s life and writing through the lens of a feminist cultural criminology. I show how the aesthetics of murder is imbricated in gendered perceptions of criminality and creativity. Raising these questions produces a theoretical conundrum as messy as serial killing. But by so doing, I aim to highlight the phallocentrism of medico-legal discourses that employ terms like ‘motive,’ ‘choice,’ ‘desire,’ ‘intent,’ ‘interest,’ ‘impulse,’ ‘conspire,’ ‘confession,’ and ‘guilt’ to construct the criminal subject.

Phallocentrism is a theoretical term used by scholars of Cultural and Feminist Studies to refer to the centrality of the masculine signifier of the ‘phallus’ in understanding and creating social relations, gender identity, and diverse cultural meaning. Feminist critics employ it to illustrate how almost all fundamental aspects of Western society are male-centric, male-engendered, male-constituted, and therefore, male-dominated. Like the critic Maureen Molloy’s motive to excavate Anne Perry’s criminal past, I make no pretension to aca-

demic neutrality. In “Death and the Maiden: The Feminine and the Nation in Recent New Zealand Films,” she offers an invaluable self-reflexive confession:

While writing this article, I have had the uneasy feeling of feeding into the re-articulation of a cultural symbolic for reasons I could not confidently identify and the effects of which I could not comfortably predict. I have had a sense of history folding in again on itself and an uneasiness about my writing this process, one of those moments in academic life when the force of the idea that we are spoken by culture comes, so to speak, home. (1999)

I chose to begin this chapter with the production history of Perry's first novel rather than details of her involvement in the Christchurch murder. During the course of my research, I observed the invariable tendency of critics—including Molloy, who commences with, “Anne Perry, mystery writer, formerly known as Juliet Marion Hulme, convicted at age sixteen of the murder of Honorah Rieper”—to introduce Perry by her act of committing murder rather than her act of writing on murder. This is necessarily a retrospective manoeuvre as one needs to identify ‘Anne Perry’ by her authorial persona to reveal her ‘true nature’ as a killer. One exception is Joanne Drayton's biography *The Search for Anne Perry* that discards the Jekyll-and-Hyde relationship between ‘Anne Perry’ and ‘Juliet Hulme.’ She begins with the tragic moment of revelation—the ‘death’ of the author that *Heavenly Creatures* brought on Perry. Admittedly, the temptation to narrate Perry's life with the surreal circumstances of the Christchurch murder is strong. The main line of interrogation—as with any other procedural drama—would be *why* she killed her best friend's mother. Why did she choose to kill her on that date, time, venue, and in that manner? These are two interrelated but discrete questions. The first, marks Perry's ‘motive’ or the development of a ‘desire’ to commit a particular act for a particular reason. The law, however, is more invested in ‘intent’ and tries to establish a temporal chain of affect that led to the murder.

At the heart of this debate is the Anglo-Saxon legal concept of *mens rea*, or the detectable and demonstrable presence of a ‘guilty mind.’ Evolving from medieval Roman religion and discourses on radical evil, *mens rea* basically guarantees that for a crime to be considered a crime a human agent must be identified, apprehended, punished, and reformed. Peter Hutchings cites the Victorian jurist James Fitzjames Stephen to distinguish between murder and manslaughter. In his book *The Criminal Spectre in Law, Literature and Aesthetics: Incriminating Subjects*, Hutchings clarifies that a ‘human’ subject became

a 'criminal' subject not because he broke the law but because he was *aware* that he had broken the law, "To commit murder, one must come under the legal narrative of the human, and a psychological narrative of volition and intention involving *mens rea*, a guilty mind, a classic requirement of a crime" (2001). The manslaughter clause depends on the perceptible absence of *mens rea*. Under it, the flotsam of acts like killing accidentally, negligently, in self-defence, or without knowledge of consequence fall under. The insanity plea, also a nineteenth-century legacy from the 1843 trial of Daniel McNaughtan, requires the prosecution to prove beyond reasonable doubt that the defendant committed the offense without a 'culpable' state of mind. The defendant must be conscious of the circumstances he/she caused that make the misconduct fit the definition of a criminal offense (McLaughlin and Muncie 2001). Serial killers, often diagnosed as psychopathic, are assigned to high security correctional facilities over prisons because they lack what counts as a guilty mind. The over-reliance of the judicial system in the West as well as the Anglo-American detective novel on the 'human' agent meant the exclusion of criminal subjects the law considered 'non-human.'

2 What is (Wo)*Mens Rea*? Developing a Counter-Discourse

On the one hand, it may seem obvious why Anglo-Saxon law does not imprison animals for attacking humans. But can we accordingly accept the fact that women were also excluded from the category of *mens rea*? Hutchings discusses how the manslaughter clause works in Edgar Allen Poe's 1841 tale *Murders in the Rue Morgue* where an escaped orangutan brutally kills (*not* murders) two women. It attacked them on 'instinct' rather than with the 'intent' to harm. Similarly, women were believed to be 'feeble-minded' creatures of impulse. If women committed murder in the nineteenth century, they were pathologized as exemplars for the insanity plea. In early criminological tracts, the criminal woman was a chimera descended from simian ancestors with physiological traits of aggressive masculinity.² Also, as per the principle of coverture, the woman's father or husband was the legal embodiment of her 'choices.' As sole proprietor of her body *and* mind, the man was responsible for a crime committed by a woman. Just as the mad murderer is no murderer at all, there was no such thing as 'women's rea.' This is precisely why Anne Perry's conviction

2 See Nicole Rafter's chapter "Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero: The moral sense in criminal women, 1893" in her book *The Origins of Criminology: A Reader*.

in 1954 is a watershed moment in feminist criminology. Not only was she of the female gender but she was also a juvenile, a patient of chronic tuberculosis and manic delirium (both Romantic diseases), an antipodean settler, possibly even a homosexual.³ Even one of these subject positions would have been deemed sufficient in traditional Anglo-Saxon law to rule in favour of insanity.

The presiding psychoanalyst Reginald Medlicott diagnosed Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker as suffering from a “rare form of communicated insanity” or *folie à deux*⁴—based on the confessions written in Pauline’s diary. Though Perry has consistently denied any homosexual propensities, it is not her word that counts as ‘truth.’ Medlicott claimed that the girls’ intimacy, flights of literary fancy, and “exalted paranoia” was a symptom of their “intense narcissism” (Graham 2011, Loc 2790). He compared them to Mr. Hyde from R.L. Stevenson’s novel *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, which was incidentally invoked by the Victorian press in 1888 to create a criminological profile of Jack the Ripper. The jury was, however, not convinced that Juliet and Pauline were delusional or paranoid. Mainly due to her stark eloquence, Pauline’s narrative was imbued with *mens rea* and the judge ruled in favour of convicting both girls. I’m reminded of Michel Foucault’s history of Pierre Rivière, and see Juliet and Pauline sharing the same discursive kinship with such child ‘monsters.’⁵ Joël Séria’s 1970 cinematic adaptation of the Christchurch murder titled *Don’t Deliver Us from Evil* is interesting in this regard. He shows Juliet and Pauline as possessing a ‘rational’ and ‘volitional’ mind in reading Romantic poets like Charles Baudelaire and conducting a Black Mass. The murder of Honorah Parker—the decisive element of the Christchurch scandal—is altered to be the accidental killing of a man the girls try to seduce. For Séria, the girls subvert the bourgeois patriarchal ideals of *mens rea* by displaying intelligence but committing manslaughter. Their act of violence is not as shocking as the way they read Romantic literature to commit heresy.

3 See Julie Glamuzina and Alison J. Laurie’s work *Parker and Hulme: A Lesbian View*.

4 Dr Reginald Medlicott was a psychiatrist from Dunedin whose diagnosis of paranoia did not convince the jury. He published his findings in the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* in 1955 as “Paranoia of the Exalted Type in a Setting of *Folie à Deux*—A Study of Two Adolescent Homicides.”

5 Foucault’s *I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister and My Brother: A Case of Parricide in the Nineteenth Century* compiles a dossier of legal and criminological documents around the murderer’s own narrative of the event. In a short case study of himself, Rivière composes an explanation of his motive to murder his mother and sister. As one progresses through the narrative, Rivière does not appear a ‘insane’ but resembles a Romantic hero. Foucault admits having fallen under his ‘spell.’

Like Pierre Rivière's narrative of his murder, Pauline Parker expressed her criminal intent to kill by writing on 22nd June 1954—"The Day of the Happy Event," "So next time I write in this diary, Mother will be dead" (Graham 2011, Loc. 2394). Kathryn Bond Stockton's essay "Queer Temporalities of Murderous Motives among Queer Children" explains why the allegation of homosexuality in the Hulme-Parker case did not discount the presence of 'guilt.' It acknowledges the epistemological tension that the subject of the female queer child killer puts on the discourse of *mens rea*. Stockton detects a temporal problem with its emphasis on intent and the way in which it becomes actionable in law. Much like intent is difficult to measure in the chronological way of 'I think (murder) therefore I am (a murderer),' Stockton claims that the "protophosexual child" also manifests in medico-legal discourse through a "retrospective" or "backward birth":

Legally, there cannot be a motive to kill until there is a killing—or an attempt, or a conspiracy, to kill. A motive to murder is technically, legally born backward from the point of (attempted) death. Yet by the time it is born, at death, the motive to kill itself has expired. No one exemplifies this problematic better than the protophomosexual child. With no established forms to hold itself in the public, legal field, such a child is the perfect sign of an explanation unavailable to itself in the present tense. Just like a motive, the protogay child (throughout the length of the twentieth century), can only appear through an act of retrospection and after a death. (303)

Conceptualising (*wo*)*mens rea* requires a systematic undoing of the gendered perceptions of criminality in the West. This does not mean simply extending the privilege of *mens rea* to females as if it were a policy matter like universal suffrage, equal pay, or free education. Such an empty liberal gesture would accomplish nothing but a moral panic around the emancipation of women, "as women garner equality in all areas of life, this would extend also to major crimes" (Russell 2013, 3). The counter-discourse of (*wo*)*mens rea* would by necessity deconstruct the centrality of the masculine heterosexist Cartesian cogito in Anglo-Saxon law and blur the boundary between fact and fiction. Rather than think of the female killer as 'insane' from a "person-centric approach"⁶ like Medlicott's, it would facilitate a shift towards a more intersectional "ecological" criminology.

6 See Shabhnām Javdani's chapter in Brenda Russell's *Perceptions of the Female Offender*. She discusses three approaches to study the female criminal. The standard "person-centric"

At the “ecological level, gender manifests in the form of gender-related power dynamics that operate partly independently of an individual’s motivations and behaviors” (Russell 2013, 13). Measuring this is easier said than done. According to Patrick Wen, the cultural fascination with the Christchurch murder, “lies not in the *who*, but in the motive—what kind of cultural habitat or deeply repressed demons could have caused such brutal violence from two proper English schoolgirls” (243). *(Wo)mens rea* is thus a product of *both* the criminal subject’s personal trauma *and* environmental factors that provide a conducive setting for motive to develop. Using a feminist cultural geography, Caroline Hamilton-McKenna, Elizabeth Marshall, and Theresa Rogers analyse how Fran Walsh and Peter Jackson adopted an “ecological” aesthetic to represent Juliet and Pauline’s crime. *Heavenly Creatures* located Honorah Parker’s murder in a complex setting where class, colonial, gender, and cultural differences between the girls escalate the violence. Rather than portray the girls as ‘monstrous,’ the filmmakers invited the spectator to empathise with the precarious conditions each female character was forced to exist in, in a New Zealand of the 50s. The ‘whorish’ and ‘tyrannical’ mothers Honorah and Hilda are not condemned for neglecting their daughters or setting a poor example. Juliet and Pauline’s criminal intent to kill is shown to be catalysed mainly by patriarchy:

By intentionally luring Honora [*sic*] to a grisly death outside the sanctified bounds of home in their girl-directed, untamed space of the woods, Pauline and Juliet challenge normative assumptions of gender, age, and class while also reinforcing the bounded spaces and places that define them. As a result, although the film’s depiction of Pauline and Juliet’s relationship to space, place, and violence suggests the perversity of normative girlhood (and, by extension, normative femininity in general), it ultimately upholds the dangers of blurring its spatial bounds. (Hamilton-McKenna et al. 2019)

Walsh and Jackson show a ‘Romantic’ development of criminal intent that may not have been possible if not for the girls’ proximity to the “unruly wild spaces” of New Zealand’s urban topography and its contrast with the repressive patriarchy of the home.

approach traces criminality to genetic factors or traits of psychopathy to construct the profile a pathological individual. The “person-mediated” approach studies the impact of childhood trauma and neglect or factors external to the criminal’s body. The “ecological” is the most holistic approach and adopts a *both/and* perspective.

3 The Criminal Spectre of the Victorians

To return to Anne Perry's writing, her fiction became popular in the 90s when writers like Sarah Waters, Elizabeth Redfern, John Fowles, and Peter Ackroyd were turning to the Victorian age to re-write contemporary issues in crime and gender. There was also a discernible rise in serial killer fiction that popularised the trope of masculine exceptionalism. While the literary question of why crime writers return obsessively to the Victorians is pertinent, it is doomed to become a criminological question in Perry's case. Why did Perry set her early novels in nineteenth-century London? What about the Victorians enabled her to reimagine herself as a crime writer? In a recent interview,⁷ Perry declared that the Victorian age was both 'familiar' and 'exotic' enough to generate interest in the female-centric themes that preoccupy her. What exactly is 'exotic' and 'familiar' for Perry about the Victorians? Why does she ally herself with certain Victorian figures, particularly Oscar Wilde, who faced an infamous criminal trial of his own in 1895? Wilde experienced the proverbial 'death of the author' not only through the censorship and reiterative adaptation of his life and works, but also by imprisonment, religious conversion, and exile. In her article "Naked into the World's Gaze: The Dark Secret in Anne Perry's Novels," Caren J. Town observes, "Consistently, murder is condemned but murderers are treated sympathetically. In the Pitt novels, then Wilde is a gnomish figure, present always on the margins and offering through his own example, a model of transgressive courage" (2004, 57).

After completing her sentence at Mt. Eden prison in Auckland, Perry relocated to England and America. Like Wilde—who lived out the end of his days as Sebastian Melmoth in Paris and converted to Catholicism on his deathbed⁸—Perry had to change her name and turn to the expiatory promise of Mormonism. Wilde, therefore, becomes a way for Perry to explicate her tragic story to herself. Her post-prison years, with its self-imposed exile are reduced to cliché in her biographies. The narrative of her reformation—"It was there that I went on my knees and repented. [...] I seemed to be the only one saying I was guilty and I am where I should be" (Neustatter 2003)—is certainly not the reason why her story gets told again and again. Even at her utmost confessional, Perry does not answer the 'why' question about the Christchurch murder. She has stated with simultaneity that she possesses a 'guilty mind' but also that she barely knew the victim and was more of a complicit witness to Pauline's suicidal rage

7 See Simon Wood's interview with Anne Perry for *Virtual Bouchercon 2020* on 7 Nov 2020 on Youtube.

8 See Nicholas Frankel's introduction to *The Annotated Prison Writings of Oscar Wilde*.

against her mother (Graham 2011, Loc. 4565). The ambiguity and belatedness of Perry's self-narratives complicates her motives in general. The question that interests me most is why, after leaving prison, did she decide to write crime fiction where women murder women? Was it some sort of extended *folie à deux*, a 'queer' wish fulfilment through literature, or a repetition compulsion fuelled by the trauma of matricide? I am forced to think through Perry's life and writing of a theoretical counterpoint to the Anglocentricism and phallocentrism of medico-legal discourses surrounding *mens rea*.

Wilde appears as a character in Perry's novel *Half Moon Street*, running in to Thomas Pitt during the investigation and confusing him for a ruined writer, "Let me assay a guess. You are a poet whom some narrow and grubby-minded critic has censored? Or are you an artist who has painted his view of the reality of the soul of man, and no one will hang it in public because it challenges the comfortable assumptions of society?" (2000). In moments like this, it is almost impossible to separate fiction from reality and the past from the present. Wilde is not just a "gnomic figure" in Perry's novels but enables her to bear "after-witness" to her own trauma. Perry ventriloquises her guilt through Wilde's neo-Victorian voice that predicts the tragedy of his own censorship and incarceration. She looks in the symbolic mirror of her past and sees 'Oscar Wilde.' The historical Wilde's 'neo-Victorian' belatedness cultivates the "queer temporality" of Perry's fictional murders. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben discuss how the Victorian age provides a platform for contemporary writers to not only empathise with the suffering of historical figures—what is called "secondary witnessing"—but it also allows them to recreate their own trauma, "In this amnesiac or myopic dream, the trauma of fiction's inescapable heritage manifests itself, declaring, with all the force of a haunting figure, that the Victorian voice remains at work, and will not be denied by the assumption of loss, mourning, and melancholia" (2010).

Through Wilde's transgressive aesthetics, Perry constructs a "fictional heritage" for herself. The Wildean referent appears and reappears in her novels in multiple ways, whether it is her hapless "amnesiac" detective William Monk who, like Dorian Gray, is trapped in anxieties about the moral status of his soul, or the outsider Thomas Pitt who rises from the social margins.

Town writes, "In what is by now clearly a pattern, Perry tells her readers that people will kill to keep their idols and illusions intact. The killer and deceiver here are motivated not by forbidden desire but by jealousy and the fear of scandal" (53). She deploys the criminological term "pattern" to refer to Perry's motive as a writer, one that is used to refer to serial killers. The accusation here is an old one, originating in the nineteenth century with the criminologist Max Nordau. Nordau argued in his 1892 text *Degeneration* that based on

the recurrence of violent themes in fiction, certain writers could be diagnosed as psychopaths in the same vein as serial killers, “the artist who complacently represents what is reprehensible, vicious, criminal, approves of it, perhaps glorifies it, differs not in kind, but only in degree, from the criminal who actually commits it” (Nordau 1993, 326). He lambasted prominent literary collectives like the Pre-Raphaelites, French Romantics, and Oscar Wilde’s circle for spreading “exalted paranoia” through their writing. Nordau’s attack on Baudelaire for exclusively “sing[ing] of carrion, maladies, criminals, and prostitutes,” Gautier for “harking back to savage sexuality,” and French Decadent writers like Huysmans for their active “delight in crime” and “absolute predilection for vice and aversion to virtue” (275) carried well into the twenty-first century, with *motif* becoming interchangeable with *motive*.⁹ This is perhaps, the literary aetiology of Anglo-Saxon culture’s difficulty in distinguishing between an act of murder and a representation of murder.

4 Sadeian Women and Sadistic Voyeurs

It is striking that the serial killer in Anne Perry’s debut novel is Mrs. Prebble, a middle-aged woman married to a minister. The motive explained at the dénouement is that Prebble was a closet homosexual and believed all women to harbour this secret ‘sin.’ Any women she is sexually attracted to become victims of her desire to purge the source of sin. Even if one concedes anachronistically that a Victorian woman may conspire to kill, what compelled this ‘lesbian’ Jack the Ripper to do such a thing to other women, “garotted, and her clothes ripped from her, her bosom wounded” (Perry 2011, 14). The title of the novel—itsself a red herring—is meant to expose our assumption that the ‘Cater Street Hangman’ must be a male psychopath. The beautiful young female victims are

9 In a clemency petition Wilde wrote to the Home Secretary in 1896, he pleaded ‘guilty’ but also claimed he was ‘mad.’ Ironically citing Nordau’s “Degenerescence” [*sic*] as evidence of his “sexual madness,” Wilde tried to make a post-incarceration insanity plea:

Though it may not seek to make them better, yet it does not desire to drive them mad, and so, earnestly does the petitioner beg that he may be allowed to go forth while he still has some sanity left: while words still have meaning, and books a message: while there is still some possibility that, by medical science and humane treatment, balance may be restored to a shaken mind and health given back to a nature that once knew purity: while there is still time to rid the temperament of a revolting madness and to make the soul, even for a brief space, clean. (Frankel 2018)

However, Wilde conveyed *mens rea* through the repetition of the temporal terms “while” and “still.” It should come as no surprise that Wilde’s petition was rejected.

tortured and mutilated fitting the stereotypical profile of bloodlust. But Perry shows us that the “secret lust” to kill here, belongs to a woman. Within the novel’s timeline, a ‘queer’ woman is provocatively cast as the fictional antecedent to Jack the Ripper. If we are aware of the details of the Christchurch murder, it is difficult not to leap to the Nordauvian deduction that Prebble is Perry’s ‘degenerate’ doppelganger.

Anne Perry explains herself in her writing, in the stories of flawed protagonists who fail the world and themselves but can transcend their past to find forgiveness. They battle their history, the corrupting influences of the world and their own fallibility and self-doubt. Its suspense and resolution are perfectly suited to crime fiction. She writes prodigiously, and with imagination and penetrating intelligence. And until the world finally ‘gets it’, and she can forgive herself, it is a story she will tell over and over again. (Drayton 2012, 848).

Why else would a female writer, convicted of murdering a woman, living in exile as a Mormon, begin her writing career with the story of a middle-aged, religious, closeted, white female serial killer?

To that extent, Perry’s novel *Pentecost Alley* is also relevant. In the guise of serial killings, there are three murderers the first of whom, Finlay Fitzjames, is a neo-Victorian incarnation of Dorian Gray. Like Dorian’s friendship with Lord Henry Wotton corrupts him, Perry creates a group of young aristocrats called the “Hellfire Club” who descend into London’s East End for drugs, prostitution, gambling, and other ‘gentlemanly’ vices. On one of their nightly raids at Whitechapel, the fair-haired handsome Finlay Fitzjames kills a prostitute by erotic asphyxiation and disappears without leaving a trace. This immediately plunges the sensationalist press into a tizzy that Jack the Ripper is back. But Fitzjames is protected by his father, who bribes the inspector to hide evidence, as well as by his best friend Jago Jones, who does not report the murder. Though Fitzjames lacked the intent to kill, which would make this a case of manslaughter, Thomas Pitt’s distaste for upper-class privilege and toxic masculinity makes him appear guilty to the reader. This is done deliberately to assuage the reader’s own ‘guilt’ of deriving pleasure from graphic representations of serial killing in crime fiction. Though there is nothing pathological about Fitzjames’s crime, Pitt adopts an “ecological” approach to condemn an entire post-feudal patriarchal society in Victorian London that allows such gratuitous attacks on working-class women. In that, both Fitzjames and Jones are proven to be ‘guilty’ under *(wo)mens rea*. Dorian Gray was not given the chance to repent and ‘clean’ his soul in Wilde’s novel, but Jago Jones’ community ser-

vice mirrors Perry's quest for atonement. While there is no escaping the sins of one's past—what Jones calls 'the selfishness of youth'—Perry attempts to retrospectively rewrite her life as capable of redemption.

Significantly, in the middle of the investigation in *Pentecost Alley*, the entire plot of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is summarised (218–221). Charlotte's sister Emily Radley overhears two men discussing the 'degenerate' themes of Wilde's novel. When one of the men reacts with fascination, "Wonderful! I shall read it—probably several times," Emily muses, "So shall I, Emily thought to herself, moving away as the two men started to discuss the deeper implications of the story. But I shall not tell Jack. He might not understand" (222). The conversation is taboo not only because women were not allowed to read such literature in the Victorian age, but also because Emily's position as a concealed witness is metonymic of the reader. While Thomas Pitt is on the case, his part of the investigation is left untold for a large part of *Pentecost Alley*. Instead, we encounter the serial murders through Emily and Charlotte's investigation. Their crime-solving sisterhood resembles a *folie à deux* and undermines Pitt's proceduralism. In aiding each other to reveal and conceal information from the police, Charlotte and Emily inhabit a 'Romantic' relationship with the law that Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker could only dream of. Emily's friendship with Tallulah Fitzjames and tampering of police evidence reflects a kind of "communicated insanity" between these women that would concern the Nordaus and Medlicotts of the world. But Perry reinvents serial violence to be an exclusive preoccupation of curious, well-read women. The brothel is repeatedly selected as crime scene, and like the nursery, it is run as a 'feminine' economy. Charlotte and Emily investigate mainly through gossip and eavesdropping in parlours, salons, and kitchens. This may be seen as a literary deflection of the domestic banality of Honorah Parker's murder, where Juliet and Pauline used a brick wrapped in a pantyhose as the murder weapon.

Along the axis of Anne Perry's complex subject position as a female writer/killer, I would like to add the category of the female reader. The counter discourse of *(wo)mens rea* must be problematised by asking what attracts women like Charlotte and Emily to true crime and serial killing, especially since women are most likely to be victims? Isn't Nordau's criminological "notion that both creating art and killing others are means of exercising power" (Downing 2013) a decidedly 'masculine' concern?¹⁰ What is truly subversive about the Hulme-

10 See Lisa Downing's work on the Marquis de Sade, Jack the Ripper and the masculine exceptionalism of the modern serial killer in her book *The Subject of Murder: Gender, Exceptionality and the Modern Killer*.

Parker case is not that the girls bashed the mother's skull forty-seven times with a brick but that their premeditation was born from reading books and watching films. It exemplifies a deep cultural anxiety against the 'Dorian Gray disease' whereby innocent youth are morally corrupted or "poisoned by a book" (Wilde 2006). The fact that Juliet and Pauline are avid readers before they are sociopathic killers is highlighted in *Heavenly Creatures*. Criminal intent is stretched in the film to convey a "queer temporality." Through extended shots of Pauline's 'voice' and surreal thoughts, the camera aligns itself completely to her readerly imagination:

Jackson makes these powers almost synonymous with moviegoing and moviemaking. In his formal choices for how he renders the girls' joint motives, it is as if he's filming their making of a motive, starring themselves (their favourite film to see). [...] he makes the girls into quintessential emblems of the moviegoer. (Stockton 2007, 317).

In an added layer of irony, Fran Walsh stated in an interview¹¹ that she read Tom Gurr and H.H. Cox's 1958 novel *Obsession* several times as a teenager. Hence, she became 'obsessed' enough with the history of the Christchurch murder to develop her own 'motive' to turn it into a film with Peter Jackson. In deciding to 'murder' Honorah Parker onscreen—in opting to depict the gruesome act through a voyeuristic close-shot camera that narrowly misses being crushed by the victim's corpse—Walsh joins her subject 'Anne Perry' as a female writer/killer.

This begs the question can a film about murder itself work like a murder weapon? Recall how Perry was concerned that a film on her family history and criminal past may 'kill' her mother. Walsh and Jackson have admitted in various interviews to feeling 'guilty' about making the film and re-opening the case for the victim's family. They absolved themselves by stating they weren't 'aware' that Hilda and Anne Perry were still alive at the time of filming; a plea uncannily like that of manslaughter. *Heavenly Creatures* becomes then, a traumatic text through which Walsh bears "after-witness" to her childhood fascination with true crime. In allying the camera with Juliet and Pauline and giving them the privilege to "co-direct" the film, Walsh too becomes imbricated in re-writing her aesthetic motives and establishing (wo)mens rea. Stockton argues that the "queer temporality of murderous motives" operates in the belated and retro-

11 See Brian McDonnell's article "The physician who assumed his patient's fever: Peter Jackson narrative strategy in *Heavenly Creatures*" for details of these interviews.

spective way that *Heavenly Creatures* adapts the Christchurch murder, “This is Jackson’s own hung time for the queer child, his way of answering through a set of layered, fantastic inclinations, what kind of feeling is a motive for murder” (2007, 319). As I watched the film, I was left wondering where the narrative of the Christchurch murder *begins*? Was it with the title scene that claims this is a ‘true story’ based on events that transpired in 1954, or the scene where Juliet and Pauline run into focus with their bloodied faces and hands, or with Walsh’s fascination with true crime, or perhaps, my own ‘guilt’ for consuming this film based on its notoriety—how far back may *(wo)mens rea* be traced using an “ecological” framework?

By way of conclusion, Angela Carter’s incisive book *The Sadeian Woman: and the Ideology of Pornography* and Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” are essential references to conceptualise *(wo)mens rea*. Both recognise that serial violence and pornographic pleasure are produced in hegemonic Western culture predominately at the site of the female body. Mulvey’s premise of the ‘male gaze’ depends on the phallocentrism of ‘scopophilia.’ This smoothens out the female subject to be an empty signifier of pleasure, what Carter refers to as the “fringed hole” in pornography. They do not imply, however, that women are condemned to be eternal symbols of victimhood and voyeurism. Mulvey argues that it is possible for a feminist spectator to become a “sadistic voyeur” by using the camera for, “asserting control, subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness” (2000). The way in which Juliet Hulme and Pauline Parker ‘scripted’ Honorah Parker’s murder casts them in the position of “Sadeian women”—like the heroine Juliette from the Marquis de Sade’s novels. Carter, having composed a radio play called “The Christchurch Murder,” claims that the “Sadeian woman” appears monstrous because, “A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of her own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder” (1979, 27). When Sade’s heroine expands her identity from that of a passive object of rape and torture to aesthetic murderer, she transforms from the ‘virtuous’ Justine to the ‘degenerate’ Juliette. In inventing this subversive position through her life and writing, Carter writes that case studies like Anne Perry dramatise the extreme limits of *(wo)mens rea*, “By the use of her reason, an intellectual apparatus women themselves are still inclined to undervalue, she rids herself of some of the more crippling aspects of femininity; but she is a New Woman in the mode of irony.” (79)

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A Poetics of Restlessness: *The House That Jack Built* and the Conventions of Serial Killer Fiction

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In May 2018, the 71st Cannes Film Festival was shaken by an unprecedented incident. More than a hundred spectators walked out of the theatre while *The House that Jack Built* was being screened. After a seven-year ban from Cannes for being declared *persona non grata*, Palme d'Or-winning Danish director Lars von Trier returned to the lineup of the festival to exhibit a controversial film about the fictional serial killer Mr. Sophistication. Many pointed out how vomitive, gruesome and vile the picture was, including the Editor of *Variety* magazine Ramin Setoodeh, who tweeted that watching the movie, “was one of the most unpleasant movie-going experiences of my life” (Setoodeh, 2018). It is worth stressing that, albeit violent, *The House that Jack Built* is not exceptional when it comes to the representation of gratuitous acts. In fact, Trier’s film is less graphic than a good deal of contemporary horror, especially when compared to torture horror. From a moral slant, it does not seem to be a work interested in raising the limit of what is representable, a remark that has saturated the negative criticism on films such as *Salò* (1975) and *A Serbian Film* (2010).¹

The outrage at *The House that Jack Built* echoes that of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), a novel not only fiercely criticised, but also censored in Germany and Australia. As Nicola Nixon states, *American Psycho* has triggered reactions due to its narrative choices, rather than to its content. For Nixon, what is at stake in these negative responses is an attempt to break away from the conventions utilised to portray psychopaths. These conventions function as solutions for the common representational obstacles to these multiculturals: their apathy, the banality of their behaviour, and the motivelessness of their murders. By remodelling these criminals into the patterns of a gothic villain,

¹ *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, is an adaptation from the unfinished novel by Marquis de Sade *The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Libertinage*. The film, set in the Italian fascism, transposes to visual media the scenes of pedophilic sexual violence, coprophagy, and torture from Sade’s text. *A Serbian Film*, directed by Srđan Spasojević, is a response to the political correctness of the modern Serbian cinema. The film addresses the horrors of the snuff industry, offering scenes of pedophilic and necrophilic representations.

that is, of a monster (and by fostering a heroic counterpart to confront this monster), these productions keep their stories cognoscible and acceptable, able to bring appeal out of dull features as well as add a 'moral' veneer to immoral matters.

There is a favourable reception for stories possessing a *consolatory construction*. That is, these stories describe crimes as exceptional, to be solved by an equally exceptional investigative figure—a hero who fights and defeats the gothic monster—as to re-establish social law and order. Some of the most popular examples of the genre fit this construction, “We need only look to a number of extremely popular novels—Thomas Harris’s *Red Dragon* (1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), Patricia Cornwell’s *Postmortem* (1990) and *All that Remains* (1992), Julie Smith’s *Tourist Trap* (1986)—to see how consolatory such constructions are in their positing of the capture of monsters like Francis Dolarhyde, Roy McCorkle, and Jame Gumb” (Nixon 1998, 227).

The representation of criminals in disagreement with this consolation has caused negative responses (by the general public and specialists alike) often based on a moral slant, similar to those by organizations for women to *American Psycho*. G.K. Chesterton, in the early 20th century, had already demonstrated that the penny dreadfuls were lambasted for supposedly pushing youngsters to commit copycat crimes like those seen on the magazines’ cheap pages. Some years later, E.M. Wrong, a trailblazer in crime fiction criticism, adopts the same attitude as Chesterton:

The detective story has proved capable of high development and has become a definite art; the same cannot be said of the tale of crime with the criminal as hero. (...) There are several reasons. A detective thrives on difficulties, cannot be great without them, but does not make his own. A criminal is in a different position. The better criminal he is, the more thoroughly he plans his campaign, every chance is allowed, for all goes smoothly, and as a result there should be no story. (...). Then there is the question of morality. Perhaps art in general should have no moral purpose, but the art of the detective story has one and must have; it seeks to justify the law and to bring retribution on the guilty. The criminal must be unmasked, the detective represents good and must triumph. To make a hero of the criminal is to reverse the moral law, which is after all based on common sense, for crime is not in fact generous and open but mean. (Wrong 1946, 31).

If Chesterton, a century ago, had already foreseen the problems with a moral assessment of criminal-centred crime fiction, arguing that so-called “high lit-

erature" could deliver many more immoral examples, nowadays, in an age of pervasive violence, it is hard to believe one can be uneasy about graphic representations. Thus, in this chapter, we hypothesise that what the general public and critics have done to *The House that Jack Built*, as much as what they did to *American Psycho* in the 1990s, is the result of a misfocus. Moved by the restlessness engendered by the subversion of conventions, the audience mistakenly overlooks the form in favour of the content.

In the case of Trier's film, this reaction is not a one-of-a-kind phenomenon. Rather, it is part of an artistic drive whose genesis traces back to the rules of the Dogme 95 movement, of which Trier was a co-founder.² Its eighth rule in particular, to wit, "genre movies are not acceptable," will guide us through the debate over his four latest films: *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011), *Nymphomaniac* (2013) and *The House that Jack Built*. In these productions, instead of avoiding the genres altogether (as the rule requires), the Danish director, on the one hand, built his stories upon the conventions of horror, sci-fi, pornography, and serial killer fiction. On the other, he managed to sabotage their key components by engendering a poetics of restlessness in the spectator. Moreover, Trier develops a restlessness which is not only formal but also epistemological. Using defamiliarization,³ he questions at once both the themes and relationship between the public and fiction. In defence of this poetic of restlessness, which garnered the negative reactions against *The House that Jack Built* at Cannes, we aim at examining how Trier deals with the conventions of serial killer narratives to affect his audience.

1 Consolation, Fiction, and Genre

In her analysis of *American Psycho* (1991) and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986), Nixon writes a synthetic yet meaningful sentence, "Neither work offers

2 *Dogme 95* is a filmmaking movement created by the Danish directors Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg as a response to the Hollywoodian big budget cinema, in an attempt to take power back to the directors over the studio producers. For this reason, they created a "Vow of Chastity," a set of rules to avoid much of the technological apparatus and commonplaces of blockbuster movies.

3 Defamiliarization, or *ostranenie*, coined by formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky in his essay "Art as Technique" (1917), describes the nature and function of Art as a way to enhance our perception of represented elements. By moving an object away from its usual context, the artwork makes us see this object differently, without the narrow lenses of familiarity. As a consequence, defamiliarization expands the meanings of that object out of bounds, resulting in new standpoints.

even a particle of consolation.” (Nixon 1998, 228). Intentionally or not, this remark refers to Umberto Eco’s *Il Superuomo di Massa* (1976), in which he scrutinises one of the literary booms of the 19th century, Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* (1843), to pinpoint an underlying operation of the popular novel: the structure of consolation. This structure has to do with a narrative organisation in which the plot is set in motion by some tension which disarrays the fictional reality. This tension needs to be released by a resolution element, consequently putting the reality back in order. In the traditional whodunit, the tension is the crime and the resolution element, the detective.

This order-off-order-on pattern is at the core of popular fiction genres. At the conclusion of typical crime, sci fi, or horror stories, criminals are arrested, monsters defeated, mysteries solved, quests accomplished, vices punished, and virtues rewarded. A comforting presence of order, Eco says, is an essential part of fiction itself. In *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994), he revisits this idea, this time in a broader sense, “[t]his is the consoling function of narrative—the reason people tell stories, and have told stories from the beginning of time. And it has always been the paramount function of myth: to find a shape, a form, in the turmoil of human experience.” (Eco 1994, 87). To rephrase, in a world in need of coherence and order, narrative has the power to fill this aching void. This need, gladly embraced by the ‘culture industry,’⁴ finds its formula, its massive production, in the structure of consolation, whose nature consists of breeding its own disorders to fix them later. The more the narrative meets the reader’s expectations, the more its consolation succeeds in providing relief. For critics such as Hans Robert Jauss, consolatory literature is not worth reading because it does not challenge the audience’s cognitive and/or aesthetic standards. Jauss’s statement alludes to defamiliarization, a principle put in use to characterise art itself. As long as expectations are broken, readers stop taking truths for granted, so obtaining a refreshing view over the themes presented by the artwork.

In “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” Tzvetan Todorov follows a similar argument by asserting that, concerning popular literature, this criterion goes backwards:

Yet there is a happy realm where this dialectical contradiction between the work and its genre does not exist: that of popular literature. As a rule,

4 *Culture industry* is a concept by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947). In this book, they asseverate that the dynamics of the industrial production are also applied, through mass media, to the cultural goods, creating accessible and easily consumed fantasies to maintain mass society in a permanent state of passivity.

the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre. Detective fiction has its norms; to “develop” them is also to disappoint them: to “improve upon” detective fiction is to write “literature,” not detective fiction. (Todorov, 1977, 43).

In the 1960s, Todorov’s assertion would probably not have been open to dispute. But we should remember that Raymond Chandler was initially disregarded as an author of detective fiction (see critic W.H. Auden, for one example)⁵—he wrote that literature between quotations Todorov mentions. A review in tandem with the heterogeneity of the genre not only pulled Chandler into the canon but also proved that the conventions of detective stories can be damaged without abandoning their key features—this is precisely what defines the metaphysical detective story (Merivale; Sweeney, 1999). Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1985) breaks the expectations of the investigation novel while it still keeps the genre recognisable. When Quinn gets to the end of his red notebook with no guilty person, no resolution, not even a clue to give meaning to the chaotic investigative process, restlessness takes over the reader who expected consolation. Restlessness sheds light on the reading process and mechanisms of the genre as well as it helps refresh our view on Art.

We contend that this is essential for the artistic campaign that Trier has chased in his recent productions. Despite the end of the Dogme 95, its eighth rule still pushes Trier towards anti-genre stories. Before we examine *The House that Jack Built* more closely, we should quickly glance through the Depression Trilogy—*Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011) and *Nymphomaniac* (2013)—with an eye on its poetics of restlessness. This trilogy is commonly approached through psychological distresses which culminate in the collapse of family bonds. What is more, they conventionally fall under the categories of horror, science fiction, and pornography. We suggest, however, another direction: the subversion of the genre conventions.

Antichrist is perhaps the easiest case to explain, given that the horror has been currently through a new bloom in movies upsetting the traditional tropes of the genre, that is, the arguable post-horror. The use of conventions, such as the secluded cabin and demonic references, weighs against a narrative in which the typical confrontation between normality and monstrosity is replaced by

5 WYSTAN HUGH AUDEN, i.e., in “The Guilty Vicarage,” reluctantly embraces Raymond Chandler as a detective fiction writer due to Chandler changes of the typical classic detective fiction setting. Before the consolidation of the hardboiled detective fiction conventions, many other critics echoed Auden’s viewpoint.

a dive into chaos where evil (more a Nietzschean argument than a Christian entity) is simultaneously absent and ubiquitous.

Melancholia falls under the category of the sci-fi, in which a family faces an apocalyptic event: a planet is about to collide with the Earth. The movie touches upon the disaster genre, but it eliminates many of its key elements. In traditional sci-fi disasters, family issues are not as central as the survival saga against the imminent catastrophe. Nonetheless, in *Melancholia*, there is an inversion, for the collision remains unreported for a long time, giving room to social conflicts. Moreover, we do not see scenes of widespread panic and destruction. The catastrophe installs hopelessness rather than resilience, and thus there is nothing characters can do to fight death.

The most difficult association with popular fiction might be *Nymphomaniac*, not so much for the lack of signs, but rather for the audience's inexperience of the pornographic novel, or the libertine novel, as John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748). Like Fanny, Joe confesses her sexual memories, and the subversion here lies in the role of the peculiar interlocutor. Seligman works as a hermeneutist hungry for symbols, overinterpreting Joe's memories and assigning quasi-metaphysical meanings to her sexual acts. As a result, the erotic power of the story is lost.

The approach between the depression trilogy and popular fiction, quickly discussed here, has allowed us to glimpse at the poetics of restlessness. Apparently, Trier has been sabotaging the formal principles of the cinema in general—in *Idioterne* (1998), *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), and *Dogville* (2003)—as much as the conventions of popular genres in particular. This sabotage implies an uneasy defamiliarization. But it also has the chance to expand the meaning of a work of art. In *The House that Jack Built*, Trier continues in line with this campaign, coping now with the conventions of the serial killer fiction.

2 Conventions in *The House That Jack Built*

Like other films in his filmography, *The House that Jack Built* carries some of Trier's key features, such as smash cuts,⁶ hand-held camera work, repetitive theme song,⁷ and chapter marks. Jack is the protagonist-narrator who asks for permission to tell his story while descending to hell escorted by a man called

6 Smash cut is an editing technique in moving picture media in which a scene is unexpectedly cut to another in order to impact viewers, arousing a sense of mystery, contrast or the like.

7 For instance, check G.F. Händel's "Lascia Ch'io Pianga" in *Antichrist*; Richard Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" in *Melancholia*; and David Bowie's "Fame" in *The House that Jack Built*.

Mr. Verge, an obvious reference to Dante Alighieri's Virgil from *The Divine Comedy*. In his journey through this metaphysical path (a journey only thoroughly disclosed to us by the end of the film), Jack recollects his twelve-year period of serial homicides, eager to justify his allegedly more than sixty murders. The recollection is organised around five chapters, that is, five incidents shaped into flashback vignettes the protagonist selects, apparently randomly, to put forward his arguments.

In order to get a proper grasp of Trier's attempt at a poetics of restlessness, we should divide Jack's recollection as segments composed of superordinates and subordinates—the former takes in the conventions of the genre whereas the latter aggregates the components that damage these conventions. On the one hand, it is true that Trier makes use of typical ingredients of the genre to let us know that *The House That Jack Built* is an example of serial killer fiction. But on the other, he subverts this genre by suppressing other key characteristics and adding idiosyncratic elements to it. As a result, subordinates become dominant, and the film acquires anti-genre properties that enhance its aesthetic effects on us.

To begin with, Trier draws upon the gothic in the first incident, the moment Jack has a chance encounter, in the middle of a secluded road, with a helpless lady who cannot fix a flat tire given that her jack stand is broken. This encounter appears as clichéd as an opening scene from a gothic story. First, as she naively climbs in Jack's van, this lady plays the role of the damsel in distress before the monstrous protagonist. Second, the recurrent camera focus on the jack, suggesting an imminent murder, generates a suspenseful atmosphere which is substantiated by the long deferment of the assault. Finally, the inhospitable setting, where adverse weather conditions turn nature colourless, photographically elicits a *locus horribilis*. In the film, these gothic locations are either remote or private, be it a road, the woods, a house or an industrial freezer.

Another typical stylistic ingredient of serial killer fictions is the exhibition of the *modus operandi*. In forensics, *M. O.* means the expedients applied by murderers to meet their criminal end (Keppel and Birnes 2006, 4). To illustrate, Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) fakes an arm in a cast to lure his victim into his truck, and Fritz Honka from *The Golden Glove* (2019) dismembers corpses to conceal them under his sink. Jack's behaviour follows the stereotypical pattern of fictional white heterosexual male serial killers: stalker, callous, sexist, unreliable, and narcissistic. He hunts victims, keeps bodies in an industrial freezer, feigns emotions, and pretends to need crutches. It is underscored that a serial killer's *M. O.*, in the long run, reshapes and optimises (Douglas and Munn 1992, 2), a fact that Jack proves right: his approach on Claire, offhandedly done, contrasts with that on Jacqueline—his interaction

with Jacqueline unfolds under cold control so as to make it clear that Mr. Sophistication has become a full-fledged murderer.

Whether real or fictional, serial killers have frequently been associated with misogyny. Not surprisingly, women are victims in four, out of five, incidents in *The House that Jack Built*. Jack's attacks on them are physical as much as verbal. The film's lack of a counterpoint to Jack's attitudes generates a kind of perverse freedom of speech which unleashes his hatred of women:

You know, there is something that has been bothering Mr. Sophistication for quite a bit. And perhaps it's more interesting to him than it would be to you. But to be honest, he gets pretty fucking pissed when he thinks about it. Why is it always the man's fault? No matter where you go. It's like you're some sort of wandering guilty person without even having harmed a single kitten. I actually get sad when I think about it. If one is so unfortunate as to have been born male, then you're also born guilty. Think of the injustice in that. Women are always the victims, right? And men, they are always the criminals. (Trier 2018, 1:35:53 to 1:37:24)

In Jack's eyes, the helpless lady, in the first incident, is portrayed as annoying and inconvenient, a woman who harasses and irritates him for being unable to fix her own car. Her incessant remarks on his similarities to a serial murderer become inopportune to the point of being used by Jack to contend that the jack stand has jumped at the lady's face by itself, rather than by his hands. Claire, in the second incident, is represented as an easy mark, suspicious of Jack at the start, but soon believing his offhanded story. Her distrust even keeps her from opening the door for Jack right away. Nonetheless, once Claire lets him in, Jack blames her for her suspicion, adding that the situation—the fact that he had to stand outside till the door was unlocked—is “damn humiliating” (Trier 2018, 21:47). Finally, the mother, in the third incident, is described as defenceless and submissive, the one who attends to Jack's orders even after he shoots her children to death. She keeps her red hat on the entire time—automatically becoming an easy target—and, while trying to escape, she hides in a shallow ditch, offering no resistance.

In each incident, Jack paints women as troublesome, gullible, and obtuse. As a misogynistic protagonist-narrator, he unsurprisingly looks down on women while at the same time depicts them as inferior, a stratagem Mr. Verge himself cross-examines, “Why are they always so stupid? [...] All the women you kill strike me as seriously unintelligent. [...] You feel superior to women and want to brag? It turns you on, doesn't it, Jack?” (Trier 2018, 1:38:04 to 1:38:35). Their behaviour before the protagonist is always short of an intellectual acuity that

he supposes not to lack. For us, Jack is still guilty, for he is the serial murderer we see on the screen committing crimes. For Jack himself, he is not guilty. By reducing women to a walking failure, he concludes he cannot be accountable to his victims.

3 Subversions in *The House That Jack Built*

If the gothic elements, the *modus operandi* and the misogyny indicate that Trier's movie conforms to the conventions of the serial killer fiction, other components come into play to subvert the genre. By and large, when he argues that his crimes represent art, Jack follows in Thomas De Quincey's footsteps in "On Murder as One of the Fine Arts" (1827).⁸ Jack acts like a "murder-fancier," a member of "The Society of Connoisseurs in Murder" inasmuch as he sheds light on his homicides as those members "would [on] a picture, statue, or other work of art" (De Quincey 2006, 8). What both De Quincey and Jack struggle to ultimately do is to detach violence from a moral agenda. This standpoint is confirmed, for instance, by a special effect we see on the screen: the first victim's bloody face transitions into the distorted image from Juan Gris's painting "Head of a Woman" (1912). But we may not feel *restless* while reading De Quincey's defence of an aesthetic view on murders because we take it ironically and, to a great extent, cynically. By contrast, Jack seems to treat his arguments as a serious matter, embodying a savant who is capable of justifying the atrocities he inflicts.

In this respect, the interlocation between Jack and Mr. Verge serves as a debate over the nature of the artwork rather than as a forensic investigation of crimes. Consequently, we come across several references to Art in the film, some of them constructed metanarratively. First, the title mentions a nursery rhyme fashioned from the technique of chain/cumulative tale, in which new events are added and then repeated sequentially as the tale progresses: "This is the farmer that sowed the corn / that fed the cock that crowed in the morn / that waked the priest all shaven and shorn / [...] that lay in the house that Jack built" (Bynum 1989, 173–174). With this in mind, we can asseverate that this accumulation of events in a chain tale is analogous with the pile of bodies in Jack's house. In other words, the nursery rhyme takes shape on a repetitive

8 De Quincey's satirical essay, first published in the *Blackwood's Magazine*, is a fictional speech addressed to a club of gentlemen concerning the aesthetic appreciation of murder. The large focus on complex and mysterious murders, those considered to be high art, makes this essay one of the precursors of the detective fiction.

sentence structure as much as the house does on repetitive deaths. Implicitly, Jack has written his own tale by serialising victims for twelve years. His rhyme, however, might not be as creative as those traditional folk narratives because Jack's numerous killings force it run in a continuous loop: This is the serial killer that killed a person / and then killed another / and then killed another / and the killed another—and so on.

In addition, Trier alludes to Eugène Delacroix's "The Barque of Dante" (1822) to turn Jack into an artmaker by showing us, in a slow-motion photography, that the serial killer has replaced the Italian poet, or more accurately, that he has become the poet, a murderous artist who can create beauty out of Hell. We should call De Quincey quickly to mind again in order to contend that Jack is comparable to Dante as much as John Williams⁹ is comparable to Shakespeare. Both English murderer and the dramatist have produced unparallel workmanship, violent and yet original enough to secure them "a brilliant and undying reputation" (De Quincey 2006, 4). Likewise, Jack hungrily seeks originality, a quality which allegedly opens the gate to the pantheon of fine creators—or of gods. Thus, his art must be fresh and authentic, far from any ordinariness which may result in ostracism. Not surprisingly, he complains about his architectural project: "The houses I had drawn had already, at the very first detail, something banal, not to say ordinary, about them" (Trier 2018, 1:45:35 to 1:45:40). The house Jack is eager to build has to offer what no one has ever envisioned before, otherwise he will not be able to rival great artists.

Finally, Jack brings up the piano player Glenn Gould, whose performances aroused mixed feelings. Gould was regarded as a transgressive classical musician, acclaimed by his virtuoso concerts, yet criticized for his eccentric hums. When the musician first appears on the screen, he is scorned by Mr. Verge: "And by the way, what does this ridiculous man have to do with anything?" (Trier 2018, 9:03 to 9:06). Mr. Verge is apparently bothered by reason of Gould's mouth sounds, not by his performance on the piano. Jack nonetheless promptly replies that the musician represents art and, unlike his escort, he is not vexed by the hums. On the contrary, he is reverential to the point of admitting Gould to his story. Jack probably refers to the piano player in an effort to demonstrate that high art is expectably exceptional, or that certain works of geniuses may never be fully comprehended. Or else, that some "sublime artworks," as he puts it, are "hidden away in the darkest corners for only God to see" (Trier 2018, 9:42 to 9:45).

9 In 1811, John Williams killed, inside their houses, seven members of two families—The Marrs and The Williamsons—with the same *modus operandi*: skull crush and throat cut. Williams's crime is the main subject in De Quincey's essays on murder as Fine Art.

An immediate outcome of such an attitude is that the murders, even though they are the film's leitmotif, are not its theme. For Jack, murder seems to be a means to an end, the material to flesh out his artistic impulses, "I often say that the material does the work. In other words, it has a kind of will of its own and, by following it, the result will be the most exquisite." (Trier 2018, 0:10:21 to 0:10:32). If the material is crucial to the end product, a serial killer artist is supposed to take lives so that art creation keeps on. Similarly, if the material has a will of its own, the murderer is not to blame whatsoever. To advance this argument, Jack gives inanimate objects a deliberate intention, instantly taking on a Romantic stance akin to that poetical faculty explained by Percy Shelley, "This instinct and intuition of the poetical faculty is still more observable in the plastic and pictorial arts; a great statue or picture grows under the power of the artist as a child in the mother's womb; and the very mind which directs the hands in formation is incapable of accounting to itself for the origin, the gradations, or the media of the process" (Shelley 2008, 115).

The House that Jack Built subverts the conventions of the serial killer fiction by focusing more on the particulars of art than on the thrills of killing. Jack's appeal to Romanticism exempts him from taking responsibility, as if his weapons had a volition whose etiology could not be found, as Mr. Verge points out, "So the material was the jack and it jumped into the lady's face on its own." (Trier 2018, 0:10:34 to 10:40) Although graphic violence stains the screen repeatedly, the debate is over Art, and it is based on Art that Jack enters a plea of not guilty.

It is worth noting that we equally plead not guilty before a serial killer narrative by means of Art. As we interact with such a fiction, our pleasure comes over our guilt as long as we keep in mind that those serialised murders are nothing but make-believe. In other words, the reality construed by the author, albeit it resembles the world in which we live, is circumscribed within a matter of fabrication, for the characters (murderer, victims, detective figures, etc.) cannot come to life outside of the fictional narrative. In short, its graphically, to name but one aspect, is not (and will never be) real. But Trier follows the instructions of De Quincey by setting aside the victims to give voice to the serial killer: "What then must he [the poet] do? He must throw interest on the murderer: our sympathy¹⁰ must be with him" (De Quincey 2006, 5). In *The House that Jack Built* we are allowed to the depth of Jack's mind, namely, his thoughts, his feelings (or the lack of them) as well as his viewpoints. This open access arouses

10 De Quincey himself explains his meaning of the word *sympathy*: "of course I mean a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter into his feelings, and are made to understand them—not a sympathy of pity or approbation." (De Quincey 2006, 5).

restless owing to the lack of a counterpoint. As said before, Jack's story is not set in contrast to any other—he is the only one to tell his criminal tale. As a result, we learn straight from the perpetrator the atrocities narrated.

Chances are that a film which steps away from the conventions of serial killer fiction will also push aside sociological or psychological justifications for its protagonist's actions. One of the concerns of the gothic is the interdependence of the past and present, in which long-repressed historical issues torment the character, whether they were a tragic event, a criminal act or any circumstance powerful enough to haunt this character years later. When it comes to serial killers, a revisitation of biographical facts is welcomed, with the purpose of finding the etiology of their motive, or at least a pattern of behaviour which could suggest a guilty mind. That is why true crime books, documentaries, novels and films customarily foreground the killer's childhood and pre-homicide period.

The House that Jack Built sabotages its protagonist's pre-murderous biography. Jack reveals that, as a child, he suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder, making him unable to leave a room unless it was spotless. Apart from that, there is no consideration about what could have motivated him to serial killing. In the second incident, this obsessive-compulsive disorder functions more as a formal element for a suspenseful scene than as a mainspring of psychopathy; on a verge of being caught, Jack still comes back to Claire's house again and again for bloodstains.

On a sociological level, nothing is reported about Jack's family members. There is a young Jack looking blankly at us, but its parents or siblings are not represented. Even his playtime in the reeds lacks social interaction—the young boy plays around by himself. Despite Jack states he used to partake in games, he is not seen socialising with friends. All in all, questions about his childhood are kept unanswered. On a psychological level, Jack admits to having been, “a very sensitive child, profoundly afraid of playing,” and adds, “For example, hide-and-seek. In the case of hide, I always chose to run in near panic into a field of reeds to hide.” (Trier 2018, 42:39 to 42:53) Such statements could have hinted that a certain catalyst for a troubled mind existed if it were not for the fact that this subject is being interpreted positively. Offering another viewpoint, Mr. Verge posits that running into the reeds appears to be a precocious search for fame, for a widespread reputation, far from anything disadvantageous or inconvenient for the murderer, “The choice of the dash through the reeds was an escape but also an open invitation to the pursuer because of the clear path of broken reeds left behind. Was there an element of come-and-catch-me in you as a child? Or perhaps more importantly in you as a person?” (Trier 2018, 43:02 to 43:25)

A person-centred approach tries its best to answer the whys of a serial killer's actions with the intention to provide the audience with a consolation. The absence of social interactions could have pointed out, for instance, that Jack had a psychological disorder, such as social phobia or the like, which pushed him away from human companionship, what could have explained the suppression of parents, siblings, and friends from his recollection. Nonetheless, this justification withers by the time we watch him with a family in the third incident, and with a girlfriend in the fourth. It is equally conventional to reach this consolation through characters who materialise the authority figure, played oftentimes by an expert who have studied the case. Such a character has no place in Trier's film. If ever, this place is roughly taken by Mr. Verge, whose erudition allows him to barge into the conversation with terms as technical as *ordnungszwang*. When biographical facts fail to relieve the tension, restlessness is what is left for the audience. This serial killer inevitably shifts into an incognito mode which frustrates the spectator's quest for answers.

Our *restlessness* is aggravated by the banality of Jack's justification. Jack resorts to Art because, as a narcissistic protagonist, he wants to achieve a high reputation (David Bowie's "Fame" validates his craving) through serial murder:

The person or persons who conceived the Stuka and its functions were icon-creators. What I'm getting at is this: as disinclined as the world is to acknowledge the beauty of decay, it's just as disinclined to give credit to those—no, credit to us—who create the real icons of this planet. We are deemed the ultimate evil. All the icons that have had and always will have an impact on the world are for me extravagant art. (Trier 2018, 1:47:06 to 1:47:43)

As he finds logic in his artistic reification, Jack's explanation about the noble rot leads him to equalize his multicide with those of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Mao and Amin. By regarding his victims as nothing but material for his iconic Art, Jack becomes whimsical, the one who slays over and over to merely fulfil a so-called grand design. In short, what seems to be pathetic is the criminal story of an engineer, who wants to be an architect, struggling to build a house made of dead bodies carefully arranged as Fine Art. We call De Quincey to conclude that Trier's killer is an artist manqué, a frustrated man who narcissistically takes himself as an icon comparable to the dictators we see on the screen. From Jack's perspective, his house is a masterpiece; from ours, it is a banal justification. Driven by self-esteem and self-absorption, he imposes his own view on Art, regardless of Mr. Verge's moralistic pushback, "Stop it! You Antichrist!" (Trier 2018, 1:47:58 to 1:47:59). When the biographical etiology of the serial killer's

motives fails to provide consolation, in Nixon's terms, the spectator necessarily looks for it in the narrative present (that is to say, in arguments) rather than in the past, as the gothic formula demands. Once again, we catch no sight of relief, for the banality of Jack's justification hinders our quest.

Trier continues to provide the spectator with no solace by opting for an anti-climax. Another key characteristic of serial killer fictions is the presence of an investigative figure, a character (a detective, a police officer, a journalist, a family member, etc.) who embodies an eagerness for punishment. As 'monsters,' serial killers destabilise discourses of normality and smash the boundaries of what is ordinary, possible or acceptable to a given society. They disrupt modern legal codes for killing repeatedly and callously, resulting in a cultural desire for a counter-attack to restore social institutions, "The monster of prohibition exists to demarcate the bonds that hold together that system of relations we call culture, to call horrid attention to the borders that cannot—must not—be crossed." (Cohen 1996, 13). When introduced to the story, the investigative figure works hard to bring stability—and then relief—back to the narrative.

In the presence of an investigator, Trier could make use of the traditional whodunit, after the fashion of Casanova's *Kiss the Girls* (1997), whose identity is concealed until the last scene. The major attention would rely on two moments: the discovery of the crimes and the discovery of the criminal (Todorov 1977, 45). Similarly, the investigative figure could serve as a main element of the howcatchem, as in *Untraceable* (2008), in which the murderer's identity is revealed at a certain point, and then the confrontation between the serial killer and the FBI agent takes place. After the discovery of the criminal, the focus shifts towards investigation procedures, cat-and-mouse games, and narrow escapes. *The House that Jack Built*, however, rejects the investigative figure in favour of a total focus on the serial killer. The serial killer's identity is known from the very beginning and his point of view directs the course of the story. Jack discusses his crimes openly, builds up a particular logic behind his murders, and is aware of his own diagnosis, "But, did you understand, or even better, did you accept the connection to your own personality, that you yourself were a psychopath?" "Well, I'm not stupid." (Trier 2018, 0:41:02 to 0:41:24). To prove his awareness, Jack shows pedagogical cue cards with adjectives describing his personality.

By eliminating the investigative figure, Trier chooses destabilisation over stability, disorder over social restoration, restlessness over consolation. The typical serial killer fiction celebrates the resurgence of protective institutions, a return to normality materialized by the law enforced against the criminal. Norman Bates, Buffalo Bill, Fritz Honka, Casanova, Owen Reilly, all of these 'masculine' and misogynistic murderers in mainstream Western cinema are punished one

way or another, being arrested or shot to death. Jack, on the contrary, commits his serial crimes undisturbedly, so much so that he feels surprised for never been caught, “More like amazement when I think about all the things I’ve done in my life without it, in any way, resulting in punishment.” (Trier 2018, 0:43:37 to 0:43:46).

Trier exploits neither the ‘whodunnit’ nor the ‘howcatchem’ to build up to a climax, opting for an utterly banal anti-climax in which Jack escapes easily to a metaphysical dimension. Under the rules of the genre, serial killers are to be punished here and now so that the audience has the chance to mitigate its tension. By the time Jack descends to ‘Hell’ after successfully avoiding arrest, it appears to us that he triumphs, that the protective institutions are useless, and that fundamentally it is chaos that reigns over society. In reality, Jack is punished when he falls in the bottomless pit. Thanks to his unlimited hubris, he still believes he can (just like he did in the natural world) escape Hell. But, if it is true that whatever goes around comes around, this supernatural punishment is an anti-climax. Jack is surely sentenced to a hellish existence. Still, this punishment cannot give us solace.

In *The House that Jack Built*, the subordinate elements spread over the superordinates. Trier arranges conventional ingredients along with unusual components to create an anti-genre narrative whose outcome is a poetics of restlessness. To a certain extent, he still follows the rules of his Dogme 95. Even if some scenes may provide a rather typical serial killer narrative, the insertion of long debates on art, victims taken as mere material, pointless biographical facts, banal justification, and an anticlimactic ending damages what we expect of such genre. As a result, ethical issues give way to purely aesthetic ones. The film impacts us for its brutal scenes, but it upsets us owing to its subversion of conventions.

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PART 3

Transnational Evil of Banality



Murder and Meaning: The Ordinariness of Violence in *Memories of Murder*

Reza Pourmikhail

The serial killer film, if it has not quite separated itself off from the more standard popular genres it belongs to—‘horror,’ ‘thriller,’ ‘detective story,’ and ‘mystery’—has, over the past two decades, distinguished itself as a form in which issues of perhaps unexpected moral complexity may arise and be explored. The paradoxical desires at work in the production and consumption of serial killer films are numerous. The spectacle of gruesome murder, asked for again and again by audiences and provided by directors, must be balanced against the competing desire for narratives in which the identity of the killer is held back. Does this mean that serial killer films simply demonstrate our desire to experience a sublimely violent spectacle at the expense of any real knowledge? In the matrix of killer, victim, and detective, where does the spectator find themselves in a serial killer film? How are we to understand our own seemingly ordinary world in relation to the lurid, enticing, horrific worlds we see on screen? These questions, among others, will be considered at length in this chapter, the subject of which is the South Korean film *Memories of Murder* (2003).

The representation of crime and violence in films raises many questions for thinking about the function of the arts in society. According to Nicole Rafter, crime films serve many different functions, and can be understood as having a “dialectical” relationship with the society in which they are produced (Rafter 2000, 8). Crime films “mold ideology” (Rafter 2000, 9), and thus provide myths by which people understand reality. These ideological beliefs in turn affect the recirculation of crime films; at the same time, subversions of the ideologically dominant narratives shape new ways of understanding crime and violence. Crime films and their violence provide extensive pleasure to audiences, for a variety of reasons: pleasure may be taken at the same time in “identify[ing] with the bad guys ... without paying a price” and in “participating virtuously in the pursuit of justice” (Rafter 2000, 11–12). As Rafter says, crime films exist because they “feed our apparently insatiable hunger for stories about crimes, investigations, trials, and punishments” (Rafter 2000, 21). *Memories of Murder*, a film about the investigation into a series of murders, certainly feeds many dif-

ferent audience appetites: for violence, for the intrigue of the detective story, and for the possibility of justice served at the end, to name a few. It is a film that indulges the pleasures of violence in cinema, but it is also a film that investigates these pleasures and unmask them. As Northrop Frye writes:

Literature keeps presenting the most vicious things to us as entertainment, but what it appeals to is not any pleasure in these things, but the exhilaration of standing apart from them and being able to see them for what they are because they aren't really happening. (Frye 1993, 60).

This is an idealistic view of how the representation of violence may function in art; if part of what Frye says is true, it is probably still the case that art does “appeal,” in some sense, to pleasure in “vicious things,” while at the same time striving for “being able to see [violence] for what [it is],” a striving that is never quite fully achieved, perhaps. I will aim in this chapter to investigate the extent to which *Memories of Murder* balances all these opposing forces that are constantly at work in the serial killer film.

Memories of Murder is a serial killer film based on the Hwaseong (Hwa Song) serial murders that took place between 1986 and 1991, the biggest and most expensive criminal case in South Korean history, that remained unsolved until September 2019. Indeed, as popular and important as *Memories of Murder* was considered to be at the time of its release, the renewal of interest in this film, especially internationally, can perhaps be attributed to the recent revelation of the identity of the real killer whose crimes inspired the film, as well as to the immense popularity of Bong Joon Ho's latest film, *Parasite*. And yet, Bong's masterful storytelling in *Memories of Murder*, and his particular use of real case material in it, depend crucially upon the historical fact of the case being unsolved when the murders stopped in 1991, remaining unsolved in 2003, and seeming somehow to be unsolvable.

To merely state that these murders were unsolvable would only tell half the story, as Bong's film serves also as a sharp social commentary on the rapidly changing picture of Korean society in the late 1980s. The failure of the police detectives in catching the killer serves as a reflection of the real-world implications that the Hwaseong murders had on Korean political history. The corruption and torture we see perpetrated by the police throughout their investigation of the case have allegorical resonances with the repressive military regime of Chun Doo Hwan (events represented occasionally throughout the film, serving as a backdrop for the story of the murders).¹ Generally, many of Bong's films can

1 For a history of the turbulent political climate of South Korea in the 1980s, see Katsiaficas 2012.

be understood as having an allegorical dimension. Bong's latest and most successful film *Parasite* is metatextually aware of the metaphorical and allegorical power of the objects that appear on the film screen. Ki-Woo remarks that the scholar stone given to him by his friend is "so metaphorical" (Bong 2019, 7:58). The title of the film itself seems to demand interpretation, even on as simple a level, "who is the 'parasite'?" Part of the success of *Parasite*, aside from the masterful construction and pace of its narrative, can be attributed to the ease with which it can be understood as "so metaphorical" or perhaps "so allegorical." At the same time, *Parasite* has come under criticism for its failure to be a proper allegory for something, mainly modern capitalism and class conflict. Such a view of allegory or metaphor is perhaps limited; the best allegories are probably doomed to fail to stand "for" anything, and rather, function as 'texts' in which there is a struggle between differing forces of "instrumental meaning," as Gordon Teskey puts it.² Teskey's influential work on allegory suggests more broadly that the forming of what we can call "allegorical" or "metaphorical" meaning involves violence.

Violence in the act of making is not just the realm of the metaphysical poets, who famously, according to Dr. Johnson, "yoked by violence together ... the most heterogeneous ideas." This violence, arising out of a demand for meaning, is perfectly 'ordinary.' I want to argue that meaning making and its inherent force is at the heart of the literal and figurative violence we see in *Memories of Murder*. Ultimately, the system of meaning-making that persists throughout the film, in particular the way that violence is made unreal, extraordinary, and unhuman, is unveiled, and what Bong reveals instead is the utter *ordinariness* of violence. At the same time, the 'ordinary' emerges as something set against the illusions of the sublime violent fantasy of the killer and the audience, as that is what remains when fantasy melts into air. The 'ordinary' then, exists on several levels in *Memories of Murder*. It is at once that which is revealed as violent, and the only refuge from violence.

1 Making Sense of Murder: The Killer's Physiognomy

The modern serial killer film, understood as a proto genre of the past two decades, can be distinguished from such earlier incarnations as Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* or the slasher films of the 70s and 80s by its interest in satisfying the twin

2 See Teskey 1996, 9–10. Teskey describes how allegory works to turn real people and things into abstractions that serve an ideological purpose, and at the same time shows how characters and figures within allegorical works struggle against this process of abstraction.

needs of its audience; spectacular violence and horror, but also a slow, methodical puzzle solving, teasing riddles, dead ends, and unresolved endings. As Robert Kolker writes, the director of such a film resembles, in some respects, the killer himself:

The serial killer film also constitutes attacks on logic and proportion, and they offer a filmmaker the opportunity to subvert both by creating human monsters, lurking unseen, planning ritualized murder, while frantic police or the FBI attempt to gain the upper hand. On the level of form, the serial killer film allows a filmmaker to build a mise-en-scene of gruesome yet grandiloquent gesture, of grisly murder scenes that satisfy the scopophiliac's need for bloody horror observed at a safe distance. It provides as well some room for irony, playing with the viewer the way the killer plays with the authorities. The viewer wants to see more, more violence, more tableaux of victims who have suffered horribly. The filmmaker gives and takes away, toys with the audience and with his characters. (Kolker 2011, 96–97)

Scopophilia, or “pleasurable looking,” is theorized by Mulvey as “pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (Mulvey 1999 836–837). Kolker, in finding scopophilia in the horror of grisly murder scenes, gestures towards the aesthetic concept of the sublime. In the most influential theories of the sublime in nature, those of Burke and Kant, the judging subject must be a certain distance from the sublime object in order to take pleasure in its immensity or might (Kant 1987, 119–120). The filmmaker “toying” with the audience by giving and taking away degrees of representation implies a kind of sublime aesthetic of the serial killer film, as Elana Gomel has noted: quoting Lyotard, Gomel connects the aesthetics of violence not with the beautiful but “the sublime ... that which exceeds representation, that ‘which can’t be shown or presented’” (Gomel 2003, vxi). This helps explain why films in the serial killer genre (and other adjacent genres), if they are successful, keep deferring information, and toy with the viewer. The subject matter itself, the full horror of the killer’s crimes, can only fully be taken as something sublime, something infinitely horrific, if it is a bit out of view. This doesn’t mean the crimes themselves can’t be partially or almost fully represented. The killer’s own identity, in fact, may function as the sublime object that evades representation.

Such a description perfectly maps onto *Memories of Murder*, which, in toying with its audience until the final frame of the film, truly gives the audience what they want. If the serial killer does not necessarily toy with the authorities,

it seems at least as if the world itself is toying with them. *Memories of Murder*, being a film about an ultimately unfruitful investigation of a series of rapes and murders in a rural area outside of Seoul in the late 1980s, is, like many detective stories, as much a film about how the detectives make sense of the crimes they investigate as it is about the crimes themselves. The overwhelming feeling for these detectives is one of frustration. Differently, perhaps, from standard detective stories, in this film the sense-making begins and ends not with traces of discovered clues, but with the human face. Park Doo-Man, a detective in the rural town where the murders take place, at first does not believe he needs to find traces of evidence or put together much of a line of reasoning to find the killer. That a human face, a physiognomy, can be read for critical knowledge, this detective Park strongly believes. This contradicts, perhaps, the very prevalent notion in crime fiction that the killer is hiding among us in plain sight, and *cannot*, by definition, be picked out simply from his looks. Yet Park's desire to be able to find the killer by sight alone has a definite criminological and literary foundation. The nineteenth century Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso advanced the view that criminality was inherited and could be identified by physiognomy. Lombroso concluded that criminals and "the insane," along with "colored and inferior races," exhibited cranial abnormalities that, he posited, raised the question of whether such people "can have the same the same level of intelligence and sense of responsibility as men with perfectly normal skulls?" (Rafter 168–170).

Detective Park's obsession with reading faces is, in some ways, wholly different from observing "cranial abnormalities"; but it reminds us that even outside of the context of the crude phrenology and race science of nineteenth century criminology, the idea of the legibility of the body that Lombroso developed was influential not just in the emerging field of criminology, but in literature and art (Gaakeer 2005, 2351). Variations on this question of the body's legibility can also be found in twentieth century philosophy. As Stanley Cavell puts it, the body is "condemned to expression, to meaning". (Cavell 1979, 357). From the perspective of the killer, the body is something to be concealed, because of its power for revelation. From the perspective of the detectives, it is a means to figuring out who the killer is. But in their act of interpreting the body, questions are raised: can an interpretation ever really capture that "perfect picture" that the body displays? And does interpretation, in fact, *impose* meaning rather than reveal it?

Park reasons that the first suspect in the case, the intellectually disabled Kwang Ho, kills the victims out of resentment for the way women react to the burn marks on his face. Park not only thinks he can recognize the killer by his look, but believes the killer is in some way motivated by his look, his counten-

ance, as well. In the history of criminology, the science of physiognomy played a major role since at least the end of the 18th century (Rafter 2009, 10), and the reflection of the crime in the killer's face thus becomes a trope used often in serial killer films. We can see this in several different ways in *Memories of Murder*: Park thinks that the permanent features of Kwang Ho's face, his disfigurement, are both a sign indicating his guilt, and a source of his motivation to kill. Later in the film, a more subtle attempt to read faces will be undertaken by Seo. The face becomes a site that can be read and interpreted, where expression can reveal guilt. The face is something that can reveal and must also be concealed, concealed to avoid detection and also concealed, perhaps, to avoid a recognition that would reflect back on the killer and make him realize the horror of his actions. As Cavell writes of the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, "cruelty cannot bear to be seen" (Cavell 1969, 275). The blindfolding of the killer's victims with their own underwear is understood by the detectives as an act of sheer perversity, but this perversity disguises a perhaps deeper motivation on the part of the killer, to hide his face from his victim. The viewers of the film are also denied a view of the killer's face, which serves to constantly heighten the tension and provide a paradoxically thrilling pleasure of denied sight for the audience.

Thinking they have their man, Park and his brutal partner, Cho Yong Koo, torture a seeming confession out of Kwang Ho. Seo Tae-Yoon, a detective brought in from Seoul to help with the case, disdains this method of investigating and instead seems, at least at first, to follow a recognisably Western methodical and logical approach. He reasons that Kwang Ho, with his webbed fingers, would not be capable of tying the intricate and tight knots found restraining the victims. Other developments in the case, such as the oral account of the only survivor, lead Seo, ironically to focus not on faces but on hands: he dismisses the second suspect because his hands are rough, whereas the third and the major suspect in the case, Park Hyun Gyu, has delicate hands, "like a woman's" as the lone survivor of the killer described them. The delicacy of the killer's hands, coupled with the intricate binding he performs on his victims, makes him into a kind of artist (Black 1991, 111–122). Somewhat related to these two corporeal expressions of the killer, and to the killer's association with artistry, are the clothes worn by the victims. The killer uses the clothing of the victims to bind them, and then places their panties or bras over their heads, as is narrated by Kwang Ho in a seeming confession. But he is in fact only narrating what he has witnessed. Kwang Ho's false confession could be taken, on the surface, as the result of his disability, which the detectives take advantage of in leading him on during questioning. But it is perhaps more accurate to say that a general air of guilt and complicity pervades the film and touches all the male characters.

This complicity extends to the viewer of the film as well: as details and possible patterns emerge throughout the film, the viewer takes pleasure in trying to put the pieces together, to understand the mystery of the killer's artistry.

2 Clues and the Making of Meaning

The first major pattern that is finally identified in the course of the case is that the victims were all wearing red. But this, like many details, does not remain consistent. Subsequent victims of the killer do not wear red. The use of the clothing to bind the victims, and the placing of their clothing over their heads, serves only the purpose of perversely binding them with what usually covers them. The killer, by covering their heads, is both hiding their faces and his own. The only survivor states that if she had looked at him, he would have killed her. It seems as if the killer cannot bear to look at the 'ordinary' human face of his victims or have them look at his, and instead makes his killings the scene of an elaborate but ultimately empty symbolism. In one of the later victims, pieces of a peach are found inside her vagina, and in the last victim, a spoon and pencil are discovered in the same place. To the detectives' frustration, these perverse acts carry no discernible meaning, nor do they function in the plot in any significant way. Bong famously brings back the peach in *Parasite* as an object with crucial narrative significance (Bong 2019 40:06–44:20). Here, however, it is simply a residue that can't be assigned meaning, unless its meaning is simply the sheer gratuitousness the killer exhibits in leaving these remnants, so brutally, for the detectives to find.

As the film progresses, further significant clues include the realization that the killer only kills on rainy nights that a specific song called "Sad Letter" is played on the radio on request before each killing. The police supervisor reasons that the song must drive the killer crazy, working him into a frenzy and making him rape and murder immediately after hearing it. The supervisor's interpretation is curious: the song is pensive and melancholic and would seem unlikely to work someone into a frenzy. But an otherwise trigger is common way of understanding the pathology of the serial killer figure, The song's meaning is to provide a motive for the killings connected to the killer's solitude and loneliness. A picture of the killer emerges for the audience at least, who have seen glimpses of his silhouette in several scenes throughout the film.

More than once, the killer is seen watching his victims from the trees, stalking them from above. In these scenes, it feels right to say that we do not watch the victims *with* the killer, so much as we watch the killer watching them. Our desire is not his desire, even if, as viewers, we do desire a gruesome act to be

the spectators of. Our paradoxical desire is, rather, to see the killer come into view, while at the same time knowing that such knowledge would kill our pleasure immediately: our true pleasure is in fact in not seeing him. In this sense, the perverse desire of the spectator of a serial killer film like this differs from the desires of the killer himself. The killer acts. The film, and it is all the more powerful for it, does not ever allow the killer's image to emerge. The meaning of the song, then, cannot be tied to the killer, but is instead tied to the audience, in their grasping after something to construct about the killer and his motivations.

Clues, in *Memories of Murder*, do not establish a meaningful pattern of behavior or "explanation" for the killings, but instead only tease and tantalize the detectives and the audience with the hint of some kind of meaningful pattern. The two main detectives in the film, Park and Seo, have competing philosophies about how the investigation should go. Seo, coming from the city to the rural town, displays the smarts of a city cop that has seen it all before and knows as much what to ignore as what to pay attention to, how to discriminate and carefully pick apart a case. Park, the country detective, takes the opposite approach, taking everything that crosses his path as something to be investigated (and in the case of persons, often arrested and tortured). Park states as much when he mocks Seo for his pretensions to a careful, almost intellectualized style of investigation. In an intriguing metatextual moment, a moment in which Bong shows awareness of the place of his film among the well-known Western murder investigation films, Detective Park tells Detective Seo that he is acting too much like an American detective:

Is Seoul that big? Bigger than America? ... Let me tell you about America. They've got the FBI. If you watch how they investigate, you know how? Their heads are spinning like a top. Analyzing things ... You know why? It's cause they got so much fucking land! If you don't use your brain, it's too much ground to cover. So they have no choice, those FBI bastards. But our Republic of Korea, using just your two legs you can run all over it. You know why? Cause our land's the size of my dick. So it's said, Korean detectives investigate with their feet. That's folk wisdom, you bastard. So brainy geeks like you can go the hell to America. (Bong 2003 39:20–41:10)

The explanation for the difference Park identifies is literally geographic. By detective Park's logic, distance, ironically, requires staying in the same place and thinking, because there is too much ground to cover otherwise. Intellect need only be used if absolutely necessary. Proximity and nearness, on the other hand, require and allow for a thorough "going over". But this going over is not

in fact investigative, but aggressive itself. "Using your legs" to investigate more aptly refers to Park's partner, who kicks every suspect they encounter with his boots.

The boot of the policeman that kicks and tortures the suspects stands in symbolically for the repressive regime in the Republic of Korea at the time of the murders, and when Park's partner's leg must be amputated, it marks a turning point in Park's attitude towards his brutal policing, and preludes the larger political changes to come, represented throughout the film in scenes of protest. The violence of the state may then be compared to the violence of the killer. As Elana Gomel has theorized, violence may be understood in two dimensions: "the dimension of instrumentality and the dimension of excess" (Gomel 2003 xv). State violence justifies itself by its instrumentality: it is a means to an end. The violence of the serial killer, on the other hand, is seen as especially excessive and inhuman because of its motiveless-ness. However, as Gomel argues, all violence, including state violence, in fact contains this non-instrumental aspect, what Gomel terms "the violent sublime." *Memories of Murder* allows us to see this by virtue of how we experience the depiction of the serial killings.

The film equates the aggression of the killer and the aggression of the state, but ultimately keeps the killer's violence in the dark, to the aesthetic benefit of the viewer's experience. This aesthetic concealing of the killer's violence paradoxically parallels the ideological concealing of the aesthetic qualities of state violence. *Memories of Murder*, constructs a thrilling and sublime fantasy surrounding the serial killer and the hunt for him, and Bong's direction absolutely indulges the viewer's desire for this kind of story. At the same time, the film ultimately unveils that fantasy in favor of a glimpse of something more ordinary: the killer's violence, like the state's violence, is an everyday thing. The film's drive, however, is to reveal this ordinariness as something to be known, rather than simply accepted as "the way of the world."

It is the clue of the song played on the radio that leads the detectives to Park Hyun Gyu, the final and major suspect in the case. All the detectives, especially Seo, are sure that this man is the killer. Their assurance comes from a recognition of something in his countenance, and an interpretation of the softness of his hands. The detectives do not even know as much as the audience does; while they are flipping through a photo album in Park Hyun Gyu, a photograph of Park standing in the branches of a tree briefly flashes across the screen. This moment is crucial for the audience, and yet means nothing to the detectives, who have not seen the film the audience watches. And yet Bong's narrative technique allows for the detectives to match the audience's suspicions about Park Gyun Gyu. But when Kwang Ho, the only eyewitness to any of the murders, is run over by a train before he can identify the killer, they are unable to keep

Park Hyun Gyu in custody. They must instead keep watch over him and wait for DNA results to come back from America to determine if he is the killer.

3 Recognition and Ordinariness

A final victim, a young schoolgirl that detective Seo had spoken with earlier in the film, is found raped and murdered. Detective Seo goes into a frenzy, dragging Park Hyun Gyu out of his apartment and beating him on the train tracks. In this penultimate scene, one of the main narrative arcs of the film reaches its climax: Seo, the detective from Seoul, has slowly been growing less rational and more obsessive about the case. He finally resorts to the brutal tactics he despised earlier in the film—he tries to beat a confession out of Park Hyun Gyu. Detective Park, meanwhile, has grown more skeptical and reflective, and less inclined towards brutality.

When he arrives with news from America that the DNA test is inconclusive, Detective Seo is unconvinced, and it takes Detective Park's intervention to stop him from murdering Park Hyun Gyu. Detective Park then tries one last time to look into the suspect's face and see the 'truth' in his countenance. What he sees, however, is not the non-human extraordinary look of a serial killer, of a born killer whose facial structure itself, like Lombroso believed, may reveal him as a criminal. This does not mean, however, that he sees innocence, *per se*. He asks Park Hyun Gyu "do you also get up in the morning?" That is how the English translation of this powerful rhetorical question is rendered. The original Korean can, in fact, be more accurately understood as "do you eat meals?" or "are you eating your rice?" This question can be understood in a number of ways. Park, on one level, seems to be disgustedly asking if it is possible that this killer too does what ordinary human beings do. This kind of rhetoric is common in stories in which the common person encounters an extraordinary and horrific killer.

At the same time, the question can serve as a realization about Detective Park's part of the 'humanity' he witnesses before him. For the first time, he looks into a beaten and tortured suspect's eyes and doesn't see guilt nor does he feel mere indifference. Instead, he sees their shared existential experiences: this man also eats meals. And at the barest level, the question can serve as a form of care and concern on Detective Park's part; it almost reads like a cliché of parental or neighborly concern: "are you eating your meals?" or we might say in English, "how's your appetite these days?" Finally, the question can be understood in the context of the *ordinariness* of skepticism as outlined by Cavell's work. To be skeptical of other minds, to not "see other human beings as

human beings" is, according to Cavell, an everyday human situation with great complexity to it. To see a human being "as not a human being" means to at once acknowledge their humanity and deny it. To enter a frame of mind in which the aspect in which they are viewed *as* below, beyond, or outside of humanity takes over any other impression we may have of them. The miracle, then, of the scene of anagnorisis in *Memories of Murder* is that it is a moment in which this process is reversed. Detective Park's acknowledgement of Park Gyun Hyu's humanity does not mean that the detective elevates him to the high level at which human dignity and respect reside. Rather, Park Gyun Kyu is elevated, or perhaps *levelled*, from the world of monstrous, sublime killing to the humble, human world where people eat rice.

The film might have ended on this moment of recognition, a recognition of the impossibility of knowing the killer by his face, and yet also a recognition of knowing something else by a human face. But this is not the end of the film. Instead, the film moves forward to the "present day" and in the final scene, Park Doo-Man, no longer a detective (in fact, now a salesman for a company that makes juice extractors) returns to the place where the body of the first victim was found. As he looks into the ditch he peered into seventeen years earlier, a girl asks him what he is looking at, to which he replies he is "just looking". The girl then reveals that she saw another man recently looking in the same ditch in exactly the same way. According to the girl, the man "remembered doing something here long ago, so he came back to take a look". Park asks her if she saw his face, and what he looked like, to which the girl responds that he looked "kind of plain". When Park presses further, asking in what way his face was plain, the girl can simply respond: "just ... ordinary". In the original Korean, this final word can be translated as "ordinary", but also "average" or again perhaps "plain", in this sense having the meaning of "flat" like a flat plain, in some sense like the rice fields that surround them, a level plain: the scene of the gruesome murders, and also the scene of ordinary life. That word, "ordinary", is the final word spoken in the film, and what we are left with, after this conversation, are again two human faces: the face of the girl and the face of the former detective. Bong alternates between them, and then, in the final shot, Park turns his face to the camera and looks directly at it for several seconds, before the screen fades to black. Bong's own explanation for this final shot, at least an explanation he has given in interviews, is that it is Detective Park looking out at the real Hwaseong killer sitting in a theatre watching the film, the killer literally being in the audience.

This explanation is thrilling but also probably a bit of a dead-end. Park's look is certainly intense and piercing, as if he is again trying to look into the eyes of the killer and recognize him. But what I want to emphasize here is not a

clever, powerful, but ultimately perhaps gimmicky breaking of the fourth wall, but rather Park's face itself as it appears on the screen, in all its intense vulnerability. It is, above all, an ordinary human face, just as the girl described the killer's as. Both Park and the unknown killer have returned to the scene of the crime to "look again": the memory of the murder itself, like a story, persists and demands to be looked at again. But if, in the final shot, Park is looking out at us, perhaps at the killer among us in the audience, we are also looking now at him, seeing his face in all its vulnerability and power: and so for the audience at least, the image that remains and is remembered most is perhaps not the sublime and awful fantasy of the murderer, but the human face of Detective Park, and all that it contains. What is that "all" that it contains?

To read Park's face in this moment, to see it as containing a meaning that can be captured and put into a symbolic universe, might be to repeat the meaning-making process that is exposed as futile in *Memories of Murder*. And yet it is probably unavoidable. We see the killer's face in Park's face, and we see reflected our own faces in Park's face: the killer's ordinariness and our own ordinariness, figured in this final shot, stands juxtaposed in the viewer's mind not so much anymore with the fantastical violence of the film, that which has attracted and repelled us from the beginning, but instead with the face of Park Gyun Kyu that Detective Park peered into in the rain on the train tracks, the face in which he recognized ordinary humanity. The film can go nowhere else from here, frustratingly teasing as the ending may appear. Park's turning to the camera cannot be a recognition of any kind of specific insight into the case he worked on for so many years, the case whose endurance brought him back with curiosity many years later. He learns nothing practical from being told that the killer's face was plain and ordinary. And yet, it tells him everything.

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Lurid and Unlimited: Interpreting Bateman's Banality in *American Psycho*

Patrick Lawrence

Despite its graphic content, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991) often shocks readers with its tedium. Interspersed with notorious passages of brutish violence are litanies of products and restaurant menus, detailed workout regimens and fashion advice, and lengthy meditations on top-40 music. The 2000 film adaptation directed by Mary Harron represented this dullness by staging scenes of triteness with epic intensity while toning down the explicit material. As a result, the aspects of the novel that caused many readers to find the work tiresome were amplified, while the misogynistic violence that made the book controversial was somewhat diminished. In effect, Harron chose to present the novel's assaulting dullness rather than its violent assaults. The film thus feels less bloated but not less turgid, less graphic but not necessarily less unsettling.

In this chapter, I am interested in investigating how the film can be said to have reimagined the novel's dullness to highlight the utter banality of the protagonist's evil. While an aggressive tedium was certainly forced on the reader, a closer analysis of Patrick Bateman's character reveals that all of this commodity white noise is intended to cast him as completely unoriginal. The effect is to make the film somewhat more unsettling. After all, if Bateman is less banal, less "terrifyingly normal" as Hannah Arendt might put it (2006, 276), that would make his violence more alien to the audience and more readily dismissed as an aberration. However, if Bateman is exactly as run-of-the-mill as we are—even the avatar of our own banality—we are forced to grapple with a disturbing proximity to the horror he creates. The sensational, cartoonish violence of the film *American Psycho* does have the potential to distract us from the banality of Bateman's evil, while its ludicrous excess diminishes its power to unsettle us. However, the film also insists strongly on Bateman's being absolutely ordinary in a way that can still raise the issue of evil's latent potentiality in the most banal of individuals.

The natural framework for considering the simultaneity of banality and evil is Hannah Arendt's famous *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). Arendt reflects on the trial of Adolf Eichmann for genocidal crimes committed during the Holocaust and concludes with the now famous meditation, "It was as though in those last

minutes he was summing up the lesson that this long course in human wickedness had taught us—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*” (2006, 252, italics in original). Arendt informs us that evil in our world, in its real dimensions rather than our operatic fantasies, wears the face of the absolutely commonplace and even cheap. Arendt’s reflection is spurred by Eichmann’s last words at his hanging, which Arendt finds to be clichéd and a result of his tendency to express himself with stock phrases. His dying words are empty, simply drawn from the repertoire of “funeral oratory” (252) and incapable of illuminating his motive or giving meaning to his deeds. Arendt’s revelation can be frustrating, since our assumption that evil figures are original, knowable, and exceptional is reassuring.

Elaborating further on the transcripts of Eichmann’s interrogation, Arendt remarks, “The horrible can be not only ludicrous but outright funny” (48). For her, the humour comes from Eichmann’s comic linguistic ineptitude. After failing to come up with a clearer expression for an odd phrase he had used, he tells the court, “officialese ... is my only language” (48). This statement is devastating in its revelation that for this high-level functionary in the terror of the Holocaust, any deep thinking was foreclosed by a tendency to exist only at the level of the cliché. Arendt concludes that, “officialese became his language because he was genuinely incapable of uttering a single sentence that was not a cliché” (49). However, while she feels that, “The judges were right when they finally told the accused that all he had said was ‘empty talk’” (49), Arendt believes they were mistaken when they assumed that he used empty talk to hide substantive inner thoughts of which he was ashamed. For Arendt, there was nothing under the surface; Eichmann’s evil stemmed precisely from the vacuity of his mind and the fact that his subjectivity was born entirely of the machinery of the Nazi idiom.

Also seeking to understand the Holocaust, behavioural psychologist Fred E. Katz reminds us that despite the undeniable influence of charismatic leaders, “The vast majority of killings were actually carried out by plain folk in the population—ordinary people, like you and me” (1993, 10). For this reason Katz, “looks for the foundation of evil, not in human monsters ... [but] in ordinary human behavior that all of us share” (9). In light of this, if we reassure ourselves with the notion that evil is perpetrated by people unlike ourselves, then we are dangerously deluded. Instead, the most remarkable acts of violence issue from the most unremarkable people. In particular, he wants to ensure we will avoid such evil in the future, which requires that we recognise that it has its roots in ordinary behaviour, such as career ambition or reflexive conformity to local values. As I will demonstrate, Bateman follows this path, mimicking the codes and discourses of the society around him to construct a façade that hides a

complete lack of interior depth. Thus, Bateman, like Eichmann, frustrates any effort to explain the psychology of evil, while reminding us that banality serves as an unsettling link to our own identities.

American Psycho has proven to be Ellis's most enduring text due to the controversy around its publication. Controversies over transgressive content—such as the explicit depictions of sex, murder, and sexualized murder in *American Psycho*—very often create the conditions for market success when otherwise a book may not garner much public attention. Elsewhere, I describe the process thus, “When authors publish literary works that use explicit sexuality to challenge cultural norms, it routinely leads to public uproar. The uproar generates interest and drives sales, while the resulting critiques and defenses of the text generate a body of scholarship that cements the book as a cultural phenomenon. The author and publisher often become rich (or richer) and famous (or notorious) as a result of the controversy, while the text is fast-tracked to possible canonization” (Lawrence 2022, 4). The mechanisms by which this happens vary considerably, but it is nonetheless true that controversy can help a book stand out in a crowded marketplace. In fact, this has been conventional wisdom in the publishing world for some time, as Josh Lambert contends, “Since antiquity, it has been obvious to just about everyone (except perhaps self-appointed moralists) that suppressed literature has tremendous sales potential” (Lambert 2013, 14). Lambert and I are both more concerned with sexual content, but the same can be applied to transgressive literature more broadly, because all manner of taboo can set off the censors and catalyze the process.¹

This was certainly the case for *American Psycho*. Simon and Schuster backed out of the original publishing contract after very graphic excerpts were leaked in *Spy* and *Time* magazines.² Ironically, the controversy attracted public attention and cemented the book as a touchstone of its era. In fact, because he kept his first advance while garnering a second from Vintage when they snapped up the rights, the novel proved much more profitable for Ellis than it otherwise would have been.³ Moreover, sales of the book surged. The lead buyer for Shakespeare & Co. reported at the time that her plans to order *American Psycho* increased once the initial contract was cancelled, saying, “This kind of attention just sells books like mad—whether people read them or not” (qtd.

1 For more on how censorship controversies generate sales and fast-track canonization, see Loren Glass.

2 See Todd Stiles and R.Z. Sheppard for the referenced excerpts.

3 See J. Adler and C. MacGuigan, Naomi Mandel, and Roger Rosenblatt for more on the controversy and editorial decision-making about the book.

in Adler and MacGuigan 1990, 85). Similarly, in an editorial for *Library Journal*, John N. Berry argued that public uproar actually recommended the book to library purchasers. In effect, Berry contends that the objections themselves render the book a cultural artifact worth archiving and discussing (Berry 1991, 6). One can see why when one considers that proposed boycotts and controversy also increased the book's cachet. Elizabeth Young writes that, "it was treated as a fashion statement—controversial, emotive, urgent, very NOW! Early copies became *the* essential fashion accessory amongst the hip cognoscenti" (Young 1993, 88). The publishing history of the novel thus demonstrates that violent, transgressive content has near-term market value.

Of course, like most fads, the book fell rapidly out of favor even among the "cognoscenti," and the novel has received decidedly mixed critical reviews. In some respects, the criticism of the novel reflects artistic battle lines of that era. As Carla Freccero argues, one reason that critics were loath to defend Ellis's novel on its merits, rather than the ideologically neutral free speech grounds they fell back on, is that most saw the book as insufficiently literary (Freccero 1997). In part this is due to critics' frustration at the time with art whose main aesthetic proposition is the emptiness of aesthetic propositions, which seemed to lurk behind Ellis's satire of contemporary culture's vapidty. Freccero sees this preference for a more positivistic metaphysics as problematic, contending that there is an insistence running through Western culture that truth be knowable and revelation ecstatic, a model of psychological depth that *American Psycho* disavows (Freccero 1997, 52). Combined with misogyny and a fascination with violence, this veiled truth is sought in narratives where protagonists confront the unknowable in themselves, often men, through enacting violence on others, often women. With the novel's confounding superficiality, then, Ellis appears to be calling attention to the danger of this epistemology, though critics debate whether the novel partakes in this tradition or lampoons it.

Despite all of the spilled ink, it seemed hardly anyone really liked the novel, even those who defended its right to exist and be read. As Young notes, reviews by leading literary voices in prestige outlets like *Vanity Fair* tended to comment on the publication of the book while avoiding any focused literary critique (Young 1993, 85–87). Freccero describes the situation this way: "To Simone de Beauvoir's famous question, 'Must We Burn Sade?,' which was a considered and serious defence of the man and his writing, this country answered, regarding Ellis, yes, we must, at one extreme; and no, we mustn't, at the other, but let's not read him either" (1997, 46). In essence, there was general agreement that the book was unpleasant and that it had some literary pretensions but not much taste for defending the book on the basis of those pretensions.

One of these pretensions seems to have been to critique neoliberalism through an analogy with serial murder, making explicit the implicit violence of finance capitalism. Richard Godden argues in this vein that we should see the novel's depictions of murder, cannibalism, and necrophilia as unmasking a system rooted in unrestrained self-interest. For Godden, Bateman "kills serially in accord with the ur-structure of his financial profession" (Godden 2011, 861) and the novel is "a representative text for Reaganomics" (859). Ellis's first epigraph reinforces this impulse to read the novel as cultural satire; it reads, "this personage describes himself and his views and attempts, as it were, to clarify the reasons why he appeared and was bound to appear in our midst" (Ellis 1991, n.p.). With these words, the epigraph cues us to consider the cultural imperatives that produced Bateman, warranting a critique like Godden's.

Harron adapted this critique of Wall Street culture by emphasizing Bateman's self-centered obsession with his appearance and his friends' sense of jaded entitlement. One reviewer concludes that the effect actually improves on the novel, remarking that by, "Coolly eviscerating Ellis's bloated narrative, and leaving much of the brutality off-camera, Harron captures its satirical wit with a spare elegance" (Johnson 2000, 82). The changes requested by the MPAA to secure an "R" rating apparently included cutting portions of certain sex scenes and softening some language, and the scenes of violence have been toned down considerably. This was not only a matter of censorship; Harron has stated that she left some of the gore out simply because she was unsure how to make it meaningful on film. Interestingly, the resulting film is much less shocking than the novel.⁴ Quite naturally, "leaving much of the brutality off-camera" changes the vision of novel. In Harron's version, the central critique shifts from a critique of capitalism's violence to a critique of its vacuity. This is a significant shift.

Another important—but subtle—change concerns the issue of Bateman's interest in pop music. In the novel, whole chapters are comprised entirely of mini-treatises addressed to no one in particular on the merits of acts like Genesis or Whitney Houston. In the film, these are recontextualised as Bateman's dialogue during murder scenes. Reframing these discourses in the same narrative space as the murder increases the thematic links between banality and violence. Instead of serving a dilatory function while being juxtaposed in contrast to the murders; each of these deeply superficial reviews becomes the soundtrack to a murder, transforming their significance by making the

4 For more on the relationship between the film and novel, including Harron's feminism, see Jaap Kooijman and Tarja Laine, Tim Molloy, and Brian D. Johnson.

murders and the pop critique an expression of the same impulse. Since Bateman's musical tastes are so banal, the film, though somewhat less evil, ties Bateman's evil more closely to his ordinariness.

Understanding the adaptation of *American Psycho* requires understanding its genre; one option might be crime films. In *Shots in the Mirror* (2006), Nicole Rafter argues that crime films generally do two things: criticise some social ill and offer a fantasy of remedy for it (Rafter 2006, 1). Most crime films, she argues, reassure the audience that the social body is fundamentally healthy despite the apparent sickness, of which crime appears to be a symptom. Rafter identifies the conventional nature of the genre as intrinsic to the effect, "[C]rime films provide escape from daily life, opportunities to solve mysteries, chances to identify with powerful and competent heroes, and discussions of morality that are comfortingly unambiguous. Their predictable plots and stock characters, far from disappointing audiences, deliver the pleasure of variations on the familiar. Moreover, crime films tend to reassure us that our society and system of criminal justice are salvageable despite their many failings" (2006, 9). Rafter is identifying how audiences delight in the conventional because it is part of a predictable pattern offering guaranteed resolution. In a certain sense, then, it is the banality of the crime film that enables it to be reassuring. Viewers are soothed by predictable plots underwritten by simplistic dichotomies of good and evil.

However, Rafter also notes the existence since the 1970s of a trend she calls "critical crime films" that don't offer those easy narratives. Rafter names several films in this register, such as *Donnie Brasco* and *A Clockwork Orange*, and I think we can comfortably situate *American Psycho* among them as a film that *dwells* on crimes but does not aim to *solve* crimes. The film's depiction of several crimes and its elaboration on the mentality of a killer are effected without centering the presumed readerly need for the crimes to be solved and the killer contained. While certain figures and tropes of crime films appear, such as the detective who seems to preternaturally understand the killer's mind, the novel does not proceed toward the unmasking of the killer or the end of his crimes via reform, incarceration, or death. Rather, the film refuses the path Rafter outlines for conventional crime films, and instead defamiliarises the banalities and conventions of society so that they may be critiqued, an inversion meant to provoke reflection rather reassurance. The presence of these aesthetic gestures associated with prestige crime films—as well as its provenance in a literary work—could explain why the film continues to have a reputation for cheeky intellectualism, contra the accusations it is sophomoric or gratuitous.

Just as it is an atypical crime film, *American Psycho* fits only uneasily within another genre one might want to assign it to. To wit, it is chock full of gore but

not easily classified as a horror film. David Seed traces how *American Psycho* is steeped in horror tropes and references, while ultimately concluding that, “Ellis’s narrative diverges from the paradigmatic pattern of horror movies in not concluding with a final exposure” (Seed 2014, 279). By making Bateman’s spectacular confession impotent and ridiculous, the film self-consciously signals its departure from such tropes. Because the detective fails to unmask Bateman and the reader is left unsure if Bateman’s crimes even happened, “Ellis blocks off the trajectory of most horror films toward exposure and the reestablishment of social order” (288). Without this confirmation that the logics of investigation, revelation, and punishment are effective, the novel returns to an ideology of superficiality in which Bateman’s banality frustrates attempts at moral judgement.

Seed also catalogues the many ways *American Psycho* invokes the popular fascination with serial killers, including references to Ed Gein, David Berkowitz, Ted Bundy, and Charles Manson. Seed demonstrates that Ellis constructs a fictional world that features a culture of serial killer fascination. This matters because serial killers must be a media phenomenon in order for Bateman to use them alongside the other cultural detritus from which he constructs his make-shift identity, such as fashion, television, and high society. In short, Seed helps us to see how Bateman is a social Frankenstein monster, with horror tropes and serial killer clichés providing some of the parts. Because he is compounded of so many elements, what stands out about Bateman is his constructed-ness. That is, what matters about him is that his identity is a conglomeration of the culture around him, just as much from fashion magazines as from serial killer biographies and pornography.⁵

The third important framework for analysis, the serial killer trope, leads to similar conclusions about Bateman. In many respects, the serial killer narrative is well-known and well-trod, so much so that there is a common profile, usually understood to be a single man, generally unassuming, with some form of sexual dysfunction and a history of childhood abuse. Taking this profile for granted, a wealth of popular culture is built around the psychology of the serial killer, what drives him to kill, and how he can be detected and corrected. However, in the quotation that inspires the title of my chapter, Frecerro contends that beyond this profile, the serial killer narrative enables the United States to maintain certain key myths of innocence and morality:

5 For more on the emptiness of Bateman’s identity, see Kooijman and Laine, Carla Frecerro, and Elizabeth Young.

The serial killer is a popular American figure of dementia, universally regarded as unthreatening precisely because of his singularity, the non-rationality of his pathology, and the individualized and eccentric nature of his violence. A serial killer is not the oppressed masses, and although his murders are usually lurid, his reach is limited. In this sense, the serial killer serves the function of a fetish in public culture: he is the means of the disavowal of institutionalized violence, while the 'seriality' of his acts of violence marks the place of recognition in this disavowal. Through the serial killer, then, we recognize and simultaneously refuse the violence-saturated quality of the culture, by situating its source in an individual with a psychosexual dysfunction. We are thus able to locate the violence in his disorder rather than in ourselves or in the social order. (Freccero 1997, 48)

In this schema, the cultural understanding of serial killers as isolated monsters deflects from more systemic forms of less-spectacular violence. This deflection, Freccero clarifies, posits violence as limited to the unusual individual and suggests that its solutions are also individual: "The solution to the problem of violence then also becomes relatively simple: kill the serial killer and your problem goes away" (48). Thus, the serial killer trope supports the status quo by offering easy narratives of aberration and cleansing, of individual action and individual punishments.

Freccero's argument is relevant because she crystallises the ideological sleight of hand that Bateman unsettles. Essentially, the figure of the serial killer becomes crucial to the American metanarratives of individualism and innocence, because it projects state-sanctioned systemic violence—including poverty, inequality, and a lack of health care, which are always oriented towards the horizon of death and annihilation⁶—onto individual causes and suggests that problems have individual solutions, sometimes punishment for evil-doers and sometimes personal responsibility encapsulated in the bootstraps mentality. Alternatively, society itself is understood to be essentially blameless, failing only through naivete and ignorance, rather than malice or corruption. Importantly, the novel complicates this resolution. Freccero notes that Bateman's story only adopts the surface features of the serial killer trope and that as a character he lacks the aetiology that would explain his behaviour, "What critics reproach Ellis for is that he precisely does not provide a psychologized narrative of origins, a comforting etiology for his killer's illness; we do not hear that he was

6 See Judith Butler.

a sexually abused child or that he had a domineering mother" (Freccero 1997, 51).⁷ With this in mind, we can see that the character's failure to instantiate a reassuring narrative renders his superficiality more troubling. Because Bateman gives the lie to the aetiology of the serial killer, he also forecloses the simple resolution and reassurance that aetiology promised.

Tim Haner notes that, in fact, nearly all serial killer narratives share this element, suggesting Bateman actually highlights the falseness of this narrative. After all, says Haner, "Serial killers are notoriously unable to provide plausible stories for their crimes, proffering self explanations that are generically contradictory, cobbled together as they are from conflicting criminological, psychological and fictional narratives" (2006, 102). Though social scientists, psychologists, and cultural critics are driven to understand and to narrativise the behaviour of serial killers, they are routinely frustrated in their efforts because the killers themselves tend to offer explanations that lack insights marking them as authentic, just as Eichmann did. Rather, though their behaviour marks them as breaking with the conventionalities of their cultural milieu, their understanding of themselves is borrowed from that very culture.

If serial killers only seem to be meaningful subjects, then it makes sense to turn to Elana Gomel's observation that Ellis's novel challenges conventional serial killer narratives by positing Bateman's killing as essentially meaningless. There is no "why" for Bateman's murders, just as there is no authentic identity lurking under the polished surface. Instead, "*American Psycho* ... represents violence as contestable, ephemeral, and inconsequential" (Gomel 2011, 51). Gomel inverts the conventional wisdom about the novel outlined above. Based on the fact that Bateman's murders become less real as they become more spectacular, she contends, "It is not that sexual mutilation, torture, and cannibalism reveal the shady reality underneath the brand-names-world of Wall Street. Rather, the brand names constitute the *only* reality in the world of simulacra" (52). In this passage, Gomel reveals that an important element of the novel's meaning comes not from the idea that there is a dark reality

7 "Aetiology" can be loosely understood as the search for the causes of criminal behavior. It involves the construction of explanatory patterns linking individuals' actions and experiences in early life to their later criminal behaviours. Such links are usually multifactorial and difficult to establish with certainty. As Roger Sapsford writes, "Rarely is it possible, even in theory, to argue that an antecedent factor leads deterministically to its effects; we are more likely to want to say that it renders a behaviour more likely or influences the way in which events and actions are interpreted" (2001, 27). Notwithstanding this uncertainty about causation, aetiologies are often the grounds of proposed correctives for criminal behavior that purport to address underlying psychological or social factors.

behind 1980s Manhattan's slick veneer but that, perhaps worse, there is nothing underneath it at all. Drawing the inevitable conclusion from this assertion, she argues, "Despite its graphic descriptions of murder and mutilation, *American Psycho* is not 'about' violence at all. [...] It is a postmodern novel of manners, tracing the disintegration of the cultural paradigm of depth and secrecy and the emergence of a new paradigm of surface and spectacle" (50). This idea sets the foundation for my own analysis, in that Gomel allows us to see the novel as an effort to demystify the serial killer, while also reinforcing Harron's shift away from the violence of the novel.

For Gomel all of this is true because Bateman's account is unreliable and because we become unsure toward the end (as he does) whether all the murders are only delusions. Jaap Kooijman and Tarja Laine also contend that Bateman's construction of an identity is undermined by the hallucinatory quality of his serial-killer fantasies. Essentially, they suggest that Bateman is *not* a serial killer but simply someone who imagines killing as another element of a fundamentally illusory identity. They caution that "[...] while Bateman manages to establish the image of the yuppie as a credible appearance before others within the fictional world, beyond the world of fiction it is clear that his identity as coldblooded serial killer is merely a hallucination. By creating himself an identity as a serial killer, Bateman attempts to connect with something real beyond the superficiality of brand names. However, his serial killer identity appears to be an illusion and this renders his identity as yuppie as artificial, meaningless, and invented" (Kooijman and Laine 2003). Thus, the unreality of Bateman's fantasies of murder renders his identity as corporate raider unstable as well. That seems true enough, but Bateman's yuppie identity is unstable for simpler reasons, as indicated by his insistence when questioned by a friend about why he works despite his inherited wealth, to which he responds, "'Because,' I say, staring directly at her, 'I ... want ... to ... fit ... in'" (Ellis 1991, 237). Whatever Bateman *is*, then, he is as a result of a compulsion to model himself after others.

The important element here is that the novel and film call our attention to the falseness of our efforts to psychologise murderers and impose a depth-centric model of identity. Similarly, the reassurance of the serial-killer trope is deeply unsettled by the suspicion that the identity *as* serial killer was itself only an illusion or construct, driven by nothing more profound than a desire to either stand out from the crowd Bateman resents as superficial, or, perhaps, to "fit ... in." In effect, the establishment of tropes of horror and serial killer narratives early on is necessary for the larger critique later in the novel, where such tropes prove insufficient for a fully coherent identity for the narrator or to prop up society's need for clear villains and heroes.

The bitter satire of Bateman's banality is neatly crystallised when Arendt refers to the "grotesque silliness" of Eichmann's final words (2006, 252). Bateman's words, too, are grotesquely silly, and when the novel and film's critiques land, it is through a satire that makes the self-seriousness of Bateman and his kind simultaneously ludicrous and sinister. One scene in particular stands out as exemplary. It concerns the song "Hip to Be Square" by Huey Lewis and the News. Portions of the novel's text are recited nearly verbatim by the actor Christian Bale as he prepares to murder a rival trader, Paul Allen ("Owen" in the novel). In the novel we read that the song is, "a rollicking ode to conformity that's so catchy most people probably don't even listen to the lines, but with Chris Hayes blasting guitar and the terrific keyboard playing—who cares? And it's not just about the pleasures of conformity and the importance of trends—it's also a personal statement about the band itself, though of what I'm not quite sure" (Ellis 1991, 357). With lines like, "I'm working out most every day, and watching what I eat," the song closely reflects Bateman's obsessive fitness routines (Huey Lewis and the News 1986). Similarly, "Don't tell me that I'm crazy, don't tell me I'm nowhere, take it from me, it's hip to be square" could come directly from Bateman's mouth if he were more self-aware, while his confession that he doesn't know what the song's "personal statement" is tracks with his lack of psychological insight.

In the film, Bale recites the lines in an over-the-top television-announcer voice while shuffling jauntily backwards, carrying an axe with an ostentatious chrome-coated head. He is wearing a transparent raincoat to protect his suit from blood spatter. His gestures and inflection are theatrically crisp and demonstrative as he delivers his speech and then, screaming, kills Allen with the axe. Interestingly, in the original, Owen is killed while describing his preference for Iggy Pop's more commercial records over his earlier proto-punk music (Ellis 1991, 217). The film thus replaces the novel's scene of Owen being killed as he celebrates conformity with a scene in which Bateman kills while celebrating conformity. This puts that conformity more at the center of Bateman's identity in the film and removes the implicit critique of it in the novel. Bateman is not striking a blow against Allen's conformity (as he does in the novel), he is striking a blow for his own conformity.

Contrasting with the cartoonish slickness of the film, there is a particularly brutal scene in the novel in which Bateman maces a woman for misidentifying his designer suit. After lunch with Bethany, an old lover, Bateman convinces her to come back to his apartment. When she points out that his prestige artwork is hung upside-down, Bateman ambushes her, knocks her unconscious, and nails her hands to boards. Generally, he is emotionless during his crimes, but here, his *sang-froid* evaporates, and he reveals one of the few things that causes

him to feel deeply—brand loyalty. Earlier, Bethany had tried to soothe a visibly uneasy Bateman by complimenting his suit, “That’s a nice suit. Henry Stuart?” (Ellis 1991, 232). Insulted, he tells her that, no, in fact, it is “Garrick Anderson.” In the chapter’s closing passage, however, Bateman tells her in a rage that the suit was neither Stuart nor Anderson: “It’s not Garrick Anderson either. The suit is by *Armani!* *Giorgio Armani.*’ I pause spitefully and, leaning into her, sneer, ‘And you thought it was *Henry Stuart.* Jesus.’ I slap her hard across the face and hiss the words ‘Dumb bitch,’ spraying her face with spit, but it’s covered with so much Mace that she probably can’t even feel it, so I Mace her again” (247). This scene reveals that Bateman’s brutality is rooted in image-consciousness. The brand is everything and a mis-appraised suit can lead to terrible violence. Graphic and horrible, the scene is nonetheless trivializing. Bateman, the epitome of financial excess and consumer culture, kills on account of clothes. Both scenes clarify that his violence and superficiality are not separate features of his personality, but rather Bateman’s violence is caused by anxiety over the cracks in his artfully composed conformity, an anxiety that causes him to silence criticism through violence.

As I close, I want to turn back to Arendt, who challenges Martin Buber’s avowal that he could not pity Eichmann because Eichmann’s deeds were so alien to him. Arendt avers to the contrary that the courts did not enjoy the luxury of such an evasion, since, “the law presupposes precisely that we have a common humanity with those whom we accuse and judge and condemn” (2006, 252). This notion provides a frame for understanding *American Psycho*: if we choose to condemn Bateman rather than simply to be stunned by his deeds or mystified by his evasions, we are only able to condemn him because we recognise a shared humanity. That is, we see that what he did is an uncommon expression of a common impulse.

Still, because Bateman is a caricature and psychological cipher, we do not exactly identify with him or recognise his humanity. In fact, Harron and Bale were said to have developed his character for the film by imagining that Bateman was an alien who had beamed down in 1980s Manhattan and imitated figures he encountered (Molloy 2020, 51). Thus, we do not precisely see in Bateman a common humanity that would call us to account in the conventional sense.

However, this does not mean that the film does not attempt to demonstrate the banality of evil and our complicity with it. The film’s ending is instructive. After a wild scene in which Bateman kills several people while fleeing from the police, he slumps down on the floor of his high-rise office with helicopter spotlights in the background and confesses over the phone to his lawyer, Harold Carnes. The next day, he runs into Carnes, who took it all to be a joke and who

is incapable of accepting his confession—or even recognizing Bateman. In a final slight, Carnes mistakes Bateman for another man and tells him that there is no way he could have committed the murders in question because, “Bateman is such a dork, such a boring, spineless lightweight” (*American Psycho* 2000). In the end, Bateman has fit in so well he’s considered by those around him to be uniquely unsuited to the distinctive character of a serial killer, and even a spectacular confession to unthinkable acts cannot render him compelling.

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The Digital Banal and Sublime Justice in Chinese Internet Literature

Lina Qu

The rise of internet literature to cultural prominence is a unique aspect of China's contemporary literary scene. Since 2012, the annual statistical survey conducted by China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) has listed internet literature among the four main categories of online entertainment on a par with online game, music, and video. Although fan translations available in several languages have promoted a global cultural trend of consuming Chinese internet literature (Chan 2017), scholarly study on the topic is still scarce in English. To approach the understudied topic through the prism of seriality in this chapter, I examine the web-based serial production and consumption of the *Death Notice* trilogy, a detective fiction by Zhou Haohui, which has recently been canonised and printed in both Chinese and English. The trilogy revolves around the serial killer duo Eumenides, named after the Greek Furies, whose signature is to alert the police with a "Death Notice" to preannounce their public execution of the victim. The series introduces the Chinese serial killers to popular imaginaries and appeals to public fantasies of vigilante justice.

Zhou initially blogged the *Death Notice* trilogy on SinaBlog from 2008 to 2010, and the original instalments were often interspersed with personal posts. The serial posting of the trilogy on the blog illustrates a digital form of seriality, which allows sequential instalments of storytelling to be released periodically on digital platforms and received by web-based serial audiences. With a focus on the mind-numbing repetition of violence, the theme of serial murder can take full advantage of digital serialisation. In light of recent scholarship on digital banality, I argue that the *Death Notice* series is a banal digital object consumed against the repetitive settings and acts of the everyday. The brutality of serial murder narratives disappears into the quotidian aesthetics of serial spectatorship. Contextualised in the Western and Chinese literary traditions of vigilante justice, Eumenides' murderous violence is subservient to the cause of sublime justice. The tension between the banality of digital seriality and the aspiration to murderous sublimity drives the unfolding of the series.

To read the *Death Notice* trilogy against blog culture entails a paradigm shift, whereby, the convention of Literary Criticism should be problematised

and supplemented by the modality of Cultural and Media studies. Therefore, I investigate the multifaced cultural phenomenon of the series as a fictive narrative of serial murder, a digital mediation of serial narratives, and a subcultural online community of serial readers. I also write in a twofold role: a critical literary scholar who parses the fixed narrative for meanings and a serial online reader-cum-consumer who follows and observes the fluid and interactive process of digital serialisation. The interdisciplinary and self-reflexive approach employed by this chapter corresponds to the entrenchment of digital seriality in contemporary life.

1 Rise of a Web-Based Chinese Suspense Author

Zhou Haohui had the privilege to access a nascent internet culture on campus since the beginning of his college years, a digital experience largely unknown to the Chinese public at that time. Prior to his enrolment in the School of Environment at Tsinghua University in 1996, Shuimu Tsinghua (SMTH), China's first university bulletin board system (BBS) went live and birthed a new campus culture. Internet literature entered the cultural scene in 1998, when *The First Intimate Contact*, the first influential web-based Chinese novel, was released online by Taiwan writer Tsai Jhi-heng on the National Cheng Kung University BBS. *The First Intimate Contact*, a tragic romance between the narrator and the female protagonist only identified by her internet ID "FlyinDance," has inspired China's *fin-de-siècle* cultural elites, including university students, to employ new telecommunication technologies for literary expression and cultural production.

In 2003, Zhou posted a short crime story "*Taozi li de ren*" (literally, "the man within a case") on SMTH. His first online publication showcases how early Chinese internet literature positions itself in relation to the high literature of print culture. Invoking the classic trope from the great Russian playwright Anton Chekhov's 1898 short story "The Man in a Case," Zhou's piece similarly revolves around an eccentric and solitary man, who is murdered as a result of unscrupulous online dating. The tragic death of Zhou's protagonist—reminiscent of Chekhov's Byelikov—exposes the predicament facing human societies in the digital era, wherein the retreat to the internet appears to shelter people from real life. The man in a case is a metaphor for anyone with an online avatar. The reference to Chekhov in his first published story indicates Zhou's literary ambition. Despite publishing via an alternative venue than traditional gatekeeping institutions, he writes in the great tradition of world literature classics by interrogating universal questions about humanity, such as good, evil,

and justice. Zhou's literary production illustrates the interrelation, rather than divergence, between crime fiction and world literature, particularly how "fine art and literary classics often play a role in crime fiction, serving not only as plot devices but also as a means by which cultural knowledge is spread" (Nilsson et al. 2017, 4).

Another important aspect of early Chinese internet literature is the central role of the internet. Now in its infancy, the internet was more than an alternative channel for digital communication and literary publication. Rather, it spawned new cultural phenomena and social practices worthy of critical attention on their own. Novel mediational experiences in the everyday such as mailing and instant messaging, digital diary-keeping, citizen journalism, online social networking and dating generated considerable excitement among the Chinese public and piqued the imagination of web-based writers. The romantic relationship in *The First Intimate Contact* after the two protagonists' initial encounter on the BBS is driven by their exchange of instant messages and private mails. The digital formality of messaging as well as the slang included in the messages mimics a novel social experience (Chen 2012). The encounter with digital mediation is as intriguing to young netizens as the mediated romance. In similar fashion, the narrator of "Taozi li de ren" pieces together BBS posts and threads of eyewitness accounts to recreate the crime scene. Citing student journalism on the BBS, the story portrays a novel campus culture fostered by digital mediation and participation. Notedly, Chinese internet literature has been literature published *via* and *about* the internet since its inception. Zhou was engrossed quite early with dissecting the human condition and the representation of digital mediation in the networked world, which has also engendered recurring themes and tropes in the *Death Notice* series.

Zhou's first full-length novel *Xionghua* (literally, "murderous painting") won the top prize at the annual BBS detective fiction contest in 2005, wherein his most acclaimed and long-running character Luo Fei, a police detective, makes his debut. Around this time, internet literature underwent significant transformation in tandem with the explosive growth of internet users and the accelerating commercialization of digital media in China. Many writers had their popular web-based novels printed with commercial publishers, and the spread of internet literature across media was also endorsed more and more by entertainment industries since the film adaptation of *The First Intimate Contact* in 2001. Zhou had built his fame as one of the top web-based suspense authors after his early whodunnits became bestsellers in print. It then took Zhou three and half years, from early 2008 to mid-2010, to serialise the *Death Notice* trilogy on his personal blog. The instalments of the series were subsequently edited

and published in print, which have since been added to the canon of contemporary Chinese detective fiction and translated into over a dozen languages.

2 Blogging the Chinese Serial Killers

In the trilogy, Luo Fei heads a special task force to chase after Eumenides, but the police efforts to intercept them turn out to be futile even though the execution dates always are preannounced by the “Death Notices” served to victims. Playing the role of judges, Eumenides serve the “Death Notice” as a court summons and a judge sentencing at the same time. Evoking the Greek Furies, who revenge falsehood and injustice, Eumenides target those who, thanks to the failure or limit of the criminal justice system, walk free after committing capital crimes. Sometimes, the victims are ordinary people whose incidental wrongdoing results in taking a life, whereas, at other times, the victims are members of organised crime. Eumenides’ first victim, Xue Dalin, is a corrupted vice commissioner of criminal police, who makes quid pro quo arrangements for a drug cartel. On the “Death Notice,” he is accused of “dereliction of duty, accepting bribery, collusion with organised crime” (Zhou 2018, 37) and is stabbed to death. Another victim in the first volume, Ye Shaohong, is exonerated from killing a pedestrian in road rage with the defence by her expensive and dishonest lawyer. Eumenides cut open her throat for crimes of “road rage, second-degree murder, abuse of the legal system” (58). Occasionally, police officers as well as innocent civilians get murdered too, counted by Eumenides as collateral damage of justice.

Similar to the partnership between Harry and Dexter Morgan in the American television series *Dexter* (2006–2013), Eumenides are an adoptive father and son. The older executioner is Yuan Zhibang, Luo Fei’s former roommate at a police training academy, who is devastated by his girlfriend’s death by crooked police. Losing faith in the criminal justice system, Yuan fakes his own death in a bombing and resurfaces as a ghost to revenge the good and punish the evil on his own. Under the guidance of Yuan, the younger executioner Wen Chengyu is trained in detective and martial skills and indoctrinated into merciless killing at the service of justice. Wen inherits Yuan’s signature and pattern of murdering after his presumable death at the end of the first book. The series concludes with an open ending: the mysterious disappearance of Wen’s “corpse” from the ambulance seems to suggest that both Eumenides have escaped alive. The ambivalent end renders the contention between vigilante heroism and legal justice unresolved, leaving devoted fans to debate among themselves for years afterward.

In contrast to the notability of serial murderers in Western media since the term “serial killer” was coined by the FBI special agent Robert Ressler in the mid-1970s (Seltzer 1998), representations of serial killing are still rare in Chinese mainstream media. Under the Chinese Communist Party’s heavy-handed control over social and cultural engineering, media representations of explicit violence are outlawed and censored. From *Regulations on Publication Administration* (1997) to *Administrative Provisions for the Internet Audio-Video Program Service* (2007), the state legislature has passed various censorship laws to purge all media of graphic depiction of violence—print, television, film, and the internet. The lack of a media content rating system in China also contributes to the strictly regimented censorship. What has allowed writers to explore tabooed themes in internet literature is the nebulous nature of online publishing. Since the CSBN-based (China Standard Book Number) publication administration system does not apply to online publishing, internet literature is subject to a lesser degree of censorship, if not immune to. According to scholars like Michel Hockx (2015), the relaxing regulation and relative freedom enjoyed by online publishing is a crucial condition for the thriving of internet literature. Meanwhile, Chinese readers in the post-reform era are no strangers to serial murder narratives, whether through the Sherlock Holmes series or pirated videos of American shows like *Dexter*. A niche market for serial murder media has been cultivated, and internet literature fills a vacancy in China’s cultural and entertainment industry. Zhou’s *Death Notice* trilogy pioneers the web-based narratives of serial killing and initiates the Chinese serial murderers into China’s cyberculture.

The emergence of the Chinese serial killers should also be attributed to the boom of China’s blog culture. Born as sequential blog posts, the *Death Notice* trilogy taps the flourishing blogosphere for serial readers. When its serialisation started in early 2008, China just entered its golden age of blogging. Zhou’s SinoBlog account easily attracted millions of followers to solidify an online reader base.¹ CNNIC’s “23rd Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China” shows that the size of Chinese internet users had reached 298 million by 2008, 54.3% of which owned personal blog accounts (2009). The statistics evince the prevalence of blogging in Chinese cyberculture and more importantly, the integration of the blogosphere into the networked life of the Chinese. The accessibility and popularity of blogging enhance the visibil-

1 The link to Zhou Haohui’s SinoBlog account is <http://blog.sina.com.cn/zhouhaohui>. Zhou opened a personal account in early 2006 and ceased to update after 2015 when the blog culture was dying out in the wake of the micro-blogging era, the Chinese equivalent of twittering.

ity and spreadability of serial media content. “[I]nherently episodic, consisting of posts, comments, and updates that are published over time,” blogs constitute “the environment par excellence where seriality might flourish” (Page 2013, 36). Contextualised in the content feed, each post reads as an update on the blogger’s personal life and narrative. Serial blogging enables a dynamic and sequential development of such narrative to cultivate a taste for habitual use and serial reading.

At the same time, the digital mediation distinguishes the production and consumption of the *Death Notice* trilogy from that of print series. Using video games as a paradigm example of digital seriality, Shane Denson and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann postulate, “the technical conditions of the digital challenge the temporal procedures and developmental logics of the analog era, e.g., because once successively appearing series instalments are increasingly available for immediate, repeated, and non-linear forms of consumption” (2014, 2). The instalments of the *Death Notice* series are archived and displayed as non-linear blog posts from the latest to the earliest. The “reverse order sequencing of the narrative archive,” in Ruth Page’s terms (2013, 14), creates a sequence of updates instead of a sequential narrative of storytelling. Serial readers’ attention naturally shifts from “what comes next” to “what comes at the top,” so that the logic of reading in print is replaced with the logic of browsing on digital media. Even with the meticulously numbered instalments by Zhou, it is still inconvenient for readers to follow the narrative flow on the blog. Since the linear thread of storytelling is disrupted by the reverse order sequencing of posts, it is imperative for readers to utilise interactive tools on the blog interface such as the “Next” and “Previous” buttons to assist their reading. The coerced interaction with digital media is hence inherent to the consumption of serialised internet literature.

3 Serial Readers of the Serial Murder Narratives

The overlap of Zhou’s blog following and online readership attests to the dual modality of blogging, as means of both personal storytelling and interpersonal communication. As Dean aptly puts, with the “invitation to read, comment, and share,” the blog intersects “communicative capitalism’s flows of information and entertainment” (2010, 7). Flows of information and entertainment in the blogosphere are driven by serial transactions of communication. Native to the blogosphere, the *Death Notice* series should be contextualised in the communicative transaction of information and entertainment capitalism, whose production and consumption are conditioned by the sociality, medial-

ity, and seriality of blogging. The digital origin of the *Death Notice* trilogy is also indicative of the new mediated relationship between serial narrative and serial spectatorship. As a serial media of narrative, the blog is ready tailored for use by internet literature writers and readers, as it intermediates between the storytelling of individual bloggers and the community of serial readers.

For serial readers, the blogosphere conjures up an “online imagined community resulting from the shared experience of instant publishing” (Lampa 2004, 1). Benedict Anderson’s seminal work (1983) explicates how an imagined community emerges from the para-social experience of consuming mass media. In the case of the *Death Notice* trilogy, an imagined community forms round the shared updates on Eumenides’ ongoing serial murder. Digital seriality of blogging amplifies the imagined identification and linkage underlying the community, as the “gap between episodes gave viewers much more time to identify with, and form attachments to, the characters, than if the text was viewed straight through from start to finish” (Lang 2010, 397). Sequential instalments of serial killing on the blog paradoxically delay narrative gratification and increase suspense for serial readers. At the intervals of posting, serial readers spend more time on active interpretation and community engagement such as reading and responding to each other’s comments. Blogging tools and other communication platforms facilitate such voluntary interactions. For example, discussion forums about the *Death Notice* trilogy have been created on Baidu Tieba, the most used Chinese community platform. Among those, the one that claims to be a fans’ club has over 70 thousand posts.² The self-organised anonymous community of serial readers forges an internet subculture around serial killing, analogous to the rise of serial murderers on the fringe of society.

Serial readers also shape the making of serial murder narratives. In popular seriality like blogging, production and consumption are indispensable to each other, that is, serial posting and serial reading complement each other to complete the circuit of digital serialisation. As Frank Kelleter acutely discerns, “[r]epeated temporal overlap between ongoing publication and ongoing reception allows serial audiences to become involved in a narrative’s progress” (2017a, 13). The development of serial narratives is propelled by the imagined feedback loop between the producer and the consumer, and the mediated reciprocation transforms the solitude of writing and reading into para-social interactions. Digital affordances of the blogging platform enable a meaningful communication and interaction between Zhou and his readers. With the belief

2 The link to this Baidu Tieba forum is <https://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=%E6%AD%BB%E4%BA%A1%E9%80%9A%E7%9F%A5%E5%8D%95&ie=utf-8&tab=good>

that “their contributions matter,” readers supervise Zhou’s pace of posting and demand new instalments on a daily base. Sometimes in their comments, readers point out illogical and sprawling plotting in the instalments and urge Zhou to explain or fix it. Other times, they request Zhou to start a new story on an interested topic. The feedback loop of digital seriality bespeaks the participatory culture of digital media, “with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” (Jenkins et al. 2009, 5). Rather than passive receiving cultural products, media audiences claim their rights to decentralised cultural production. The dynamics between the serial writer and serial readers is adjusted accordingly.

Serial readers’ active participation, in turn, exposes their complicity in the dramatisation of serial murder on mass media. The study of spectatorship since Laura Mulvey in the 1970s has revealed the spectator’s complicit role in perpetuating the ideological perspectives of mass media. The active or emancipated spectator, in Jacques Rancière’s terms, is more implicated in dramatic media, with the passive spectatorship being mobilised by bodies in motion. They are “compelled to exchange the position of passive spectator for that of scientific investigator or experimenter, who observes phenomenon and searches for their causes,” or, “led to hone his own sense of the evaluation of reasons, of their discussion and of the choice that arrives at decision” (2011, 4). The dramatic theatre of serial murder in the *Death Notice* trilogy stimulates the body and mind of serial readers. They are prompted to take the criminal investigation and justice discussion into their own hands by influencing the plotting and writing. The centrality of serial readers in the serialisation of the *Death Notice* trilogy validates the reading of serial murder narratives as a manifestation of structures of feeling in society instead of merely individual creation. Their active involvement in the serialisation of the trilogy also implicates them in public discussion on crime and justice.

There is a clear analogy between serialisation and serial murder in the diegesis of the *Death Notice* trilogy: Eumenides’ serial publication of handwritten “Death Notices” parallels their serial killing. The genre of “Death Notices” complies with the classical definition of seriality as, “an episodic narrative of repetitive variation” (Kelleter 2017a, 12).

DEATH NOTICE

THE ACCUSED: Xue Dalin

CRIMES: Dereliction of duty, accepting bribes, collusion with organized crime

DATE OF PUNISHMENT: April 18

EXECUTIONER: Eumenides (Zhou 2018, 37)

The above example, taken from the first book of the series, showcases the serial formula of the “Death Notice.” Each time the format of the notice remains the same with the content items changed to identify the next murder victim. Each “Death Notice” relates a stand-alone story about the individual victim, whereas the sequence of “Death Notices” reveals the feeling and ideology of Eumenides to their followers. The rationale underlying their serial murder is explained through the serialisation of “Death Notices.” The brutality of serial killing is normalised by the civility and banality of serial publishing, since recurring reproduction is a mundane feature of capitalist cultural industry. Moreover, the reception of serial “Death Notices” in the diegesis are often mediated by digital technologies, be it the police detectives receiving photos of “Death Notices” on their smart phones or the public watching news livestreams about Eumenides’ announcement of murders. The serial murder narrative is catalysed by a series of digital dissemination, rendering “Death Notices” a genre of digital seriality on their own. Thus, the relationship between digital seriality and serial murder, that is, the relationship between media form and content, is key to understanding the narrative design of the *Death Notice* series and appraising its cultural significance.

4 Serial Murder Narratives as the Digital Banal

With the prime example of blogs, seriality has become a defining character of life in digital capitalism. Technological affordances of digital media have prepared for the dominance of serial narratives, so that it is now imperative for netizens to adopt practices of serial reading and commenting to navigate cyberspace. On the one side, the repetition and variation of narratives underlying the seriality of digital culture emblemise the capitalist logic of endless and self-reflexive reproduction. Kelleter’s ground-breaking work on serial media has illuminated how capitalist reproduction drives the repetitive production and consumption of cultural commodities, which is responsible for the flourishing of popular seriality (2017a; 2017b). On the other, the sequential development of serial narratives embraced by popular culture industry offsets the disintegrated and fragmentary cultural manifestation of postmodern society. Seriality as a franchising strategy based on the continuity and coherence of world building in fiction is characteristic of what Henry Jenkins calls contemporary “convergence culture” (2006). Either way, digital seriality conditions the mundane cultural production and life experience in postmodern society.

Metaphorically, Eumenides’ murderous seriality illustrates the undertone of digital capitalism. Commenting on murderous seriality, Brian Jarvis provoc-

actively states that the popularisation of serial murder narratives exposes the “unexpected intimacies between monstrous violence and the normal desires that circulate within consumer society” (2007, 328). Citing Wolfgang Fritz Haug, Jarvis stresses that “[d]espite the advertising promises of unique purchases that offer instant fulfilment, there are no *singular* only *serial* objects in consumer society” (340). Echoing Kelleter’s insight about the seriality of capitalism’s self-reflexive reproduction, Jarvis argues that serial murder narratives are not different in nature from mundane commodities that are serially produced and routinely consumed. Murderous spectacles in the narratives mirror the recurring violence immanent in capitalist reproduction and re-consumption. His poignant critique of capitalism also sheds light on the normalisation of serial murder narratives in contemporary popular culture. Instead of regurgitating the truism about the trivialisation of violence by media representations, Jarvis suggests that murderous seriality itself is banal, entrenched in the everyday.

In the same vein, the serial and perpetual reproduction of technological and medial novelty in digital capitalism has rendered the co-existence with “new” media a common place. The condition of digital banality is a salient shift from the prevailing public fascination with the novelty of the internet at its inception. Zara Dinnen in her recent book *The Digital Banal: New Media and American Literature and Culture* defines the digital banal as, “the condition by which we don’t notice the affective novelty of becoming-with digital media. In other words, the way we use media makes us unaware of the ways we are co-constituted as subjects with media” (2018, 1). The banality of digital objects stems from the naturalisation of digital mediation in everyday life. On this topic, Wilson and Yochim also write:

[...] as new technologies are embedded in everyday life in increasingly banal ways, the mundane itself is always already digital. Readily available and always present, digital media constantly hum in the background. They stand at the ready as naturalized means for social interaction, information gathering, and entertainment, infusing ordinary joys and challenges with the potentialities of digital affordances. (2017, 16)

The habituation is all-encompassing, on the temporal, spatial, material, and affective levels. As a result, the personal as well as the social is inseparable from the digital. Digitalisation of the mundane goes hand in hand with routinisation of the digital.

Moreover, the digital banal such as serial fiction and drama is consumed against the backdrop of the repetitive settings and acts of the everyday. Ham-

merling and Nast coin the conceptual term “quotidian integration” to describe “how media recipients integrate the series into their quotidian rhythms and their daily routines” (2017, 249). Citing German scholar Kaspar Maase, they further argue, “[w]hereas canonized or professional aesthetic experience stresses concentration and close attention to the artifact, quotidian aesthetic experience characterized by bundles of divided and shifting attention in search of (physical) pleasure” (259). The implication of quotidian integration is twofold: one the one hand, the consumption of digital series is indicative of mundane living under digital capitalism; on the other, the fantasy world of digital series, regardless of abundant audio-visual spectacles, only captures divided and transient attention from serial audiences. Filtered through the rhythm of everyday life, encounters with digital seriality are subsumed into unremarkable and recurring routines. Contextualised in the condition of quotidian integration, digital seriality epitomises the banality of cultural production and consumption.

The *Death Notice* trilogy is digitalised and routinised via the quotidian integration of the blogosphere. Zhou’s SinoBlog mimics the mundane setting of everyday life, which conditions the consumption of his serial murder narratives. From time to time, Zhou blogs his private life and shares personal anecdotes, such as the birth of his child or hilarious drunk stories. Thereby, new instalments of the *Death Notice* series are interspersed with trivial details of Zhou’s personal life. Dramatic depictions of murderous spectacles are starkly juxtaposed with the light-hearted documentation of the everyday. These personal posts humanise Zhou’s online avatar (as a serial murder writer) and initiate serial readers into the quotidian integration of Eumenides’ murderous seriality. Consequently, reading fanciful serial murder on the blog is naturalised as a daily routine, while excessive brutality of serial murder is normalised as part of a mundane encounter. Intense fear and pleasure, which murderous spectacles are supposed to stimulate in spectators, are diluted. The mobilisation and animation of active participants by the dramatic theatre of serial murder is counterbalanced by the quotidian integration of murderous seriality.

5 Eumenides and the Murderous Sublime

Since the appalling effect of serial murder is downplayed through the quotidian integration of serial reading, Eumenides’ acts of vigilante justice are rendered more compelling. Eumenides fit the profiling of the typical dedicated lone vigilante, whose murderous acts bear all the hallmarks of vigilantism,

including “the pursuit of criminal deviants, the righting of a criminal wrong by violent and informal means, the leaving of a warning—in this case literal—for others who might possess similar criminal dispositions” (Johnston 1996, 220). Although whether the morally justified cause legitimises the unauthorised use of violence remains contentious in legal practices, vigilante justice has been a prominent literary focus since Chinese and Western antiquity. In this literary tradition, the vigilante stands for a constructive, rather than destructive, force to fix a collapsing moral-political order, since vigilante violence is “directed at value maintenance” (Rosenbaum and Sederberg 1974, 544). The claim to defend social and moral values against the bankrupt criminal justice system can win over serial audiences, who are habituated to the rhythms of the everyday.

It is under the name of maintaining morality and restoring justice that Eumenides launch their murderous cause. Their manifesto “A Call for Justice” is publicised on the internet to disseminate the belief of vigilante justice:

A CALL FOR JUSTICE

Filthy souls inhabit this world.

The law should be a tool for cleansing society, but the law is weak.

People commit crimes, but too often they fall outside the law’s jurisdiction.

Or the law fails to find any evidence to convict.

Too often wrongdoers are able to bribe themselves out of the law’s reach.

Society needs a different kind of justice.

I will deliver justice.

I will cleanse this world of evil. (Zhou 2018, 29)

Eumenides’ murderous manifesto attacks the dysfunctional criminal justice system and rationalises their violent acts to redress wrongs. The mash-up of moral and legal terms—filthy, crime, jurisdiction, convict, law, justice, evil—conflates moral weakness with violation of law. Common to vigilantism, its claim to justice is flawed by the ambivalent discourse.

Eumenides’ vigilantism appears even more relatable to ordinary readers when a plot twist soon reveals the real creators of “Eumenides” as a moral agent. It is Luo Fei and his girlfriend Meng Yun back at the police academy who invented the signature of “Eumenides” in a few practical jokes to ridicule their unscrupulous classmates. Later, Luo’s then roommate Yuan Zhibang appropriates their idea for his own agenda and becomes the older executioner. The mundane origin of “Eumenides” indicates a common desire for vigilante justice

shared by many. While condemning the excess of wanton violence in Eumenides' serial killing, Luo Fei confesses, "Eumenides [...] Someone who can reach beyond the limits of the law and punish those who commit crimes. Sure, we've all had fantasies about being a superhero or a vigilante" (Zhou 2018, 251). Here, Luo alludes to the Chinese popular fantasies about vigilante justice that would find their cultural root in Chinese martial arts fiction. As demonstrated by Jeffrey C. Kinkley, classical vernacular fiction about criminal cases and martial heroes have shaped the idea of "popular justice" in China (2000). The Chinese martial hero or *xia*, is "a type of person who upholds justice (including righteousness and the obligations of repayment and revenge) through force, and also the moral code associated with upholding justice through force" outside the law (Chen 2016, 244). The enshrinement of martial heroes in Chinese cultural imaginary popularises the aesthetics of the violent sublime, an ideal of the sublime justice epitomised by Eumenides.

The signature of "Eumenides" picked by Luo Fei and Meng Yun invokes the Greek Furies to reify what they envision as "a different kind of justice," justice in murderous sublimity. Analysing the *Eumenides*, the third part of the *Oresteia*, Pestell remarks that with the incarnation of the Erinyes (the Greek name for the Eumenides) to avenge falsehood and injustice, "the emotion of fear takes on a nuanced character, and we begin to see shades of fear, which find echoes in the sublime and the uncanny" (2017, 315). The enormous fear of the Erinyes' serial revenge is experienced as sublimity by mortals, that is, "some modification of power" accompanied by "strength, violence, pain and terror" (Burke 1998, 59–60). The Burkean sublime is a superior and incomprehensible power, albeit exerted "in acts of beneficence to mankind" (64). The sublime terror strikes awe into the hearts of mortals, which is subsequently "brought to consciousness not as enfeebling, tyrannical force, but as a moral imperative" (Pestell 2017, 322). Mirroring the Erinyes' serial revenge, Eumenides' serial murder derive its sublime power from the moral imperative to avenge falsehood and injustice. Violence, pain, and terror are immanent and instrumental to their acts of vigilantism.

Elana Gomel's pioneering book on the "violent sublime" (2003) posits that murder is the sublime subject by self-identification, "In order to avoid recognizing himself in the pain of the victim, the violator misrecognizes himself in the sublimity" (xxix). Through identifying with the sublime power of violence and terror, the violator justifies his atrocity of killing. In light of Gomel's conceptualization, Eumenides "misrecognise" themselves in the sublimity of serial murder. Being convinced that they represent the sublime power of revenge, Eumenides preach the aspiration to the sublime justice, asserting, "You could say that there's a Eumenides inside many of us. People need Eumenides to exist"

(Zhou 2018, 250). In the second half of their cause manifesto, they attempt to foment mass participation in the murderous sublime:

The list of wrongdoers, however, is still unwritten.
 You have the chance to write it.
 Tell me who deserves to be on this list.
 Tell me who does not deserve to live upon the earth.
 Tell me who is outside the reach of the law.
 Tell me their name.
 Tell what they have done.
 I will judge them.
 You have two weeks before I post the final version of my list. (29–30)

Eumenides' online solicitation for a name list of punishable wrongdoers taps the violent culture immanent to cyberspace. It intends to transform anonymous online spectators into proxy agents of the murderous sublime. In a striking manner, the participating online spectators of Eumenides' vigilante violence in the narrative allegorise the active serial readers of the *Death Notice* trilogy on the internet. The mirrored image of the serial spectator/reader in and outside the diegesis brings into question the complicity of spectatorship in the dramatic theatre of serial murder.

To sum up, I argue in this chapter that the *Death Notice* trilogy by Zhou Hao-hui spearheads the genre of serial murder fantasy in Chinese internet literature. Originally serialised on Zhou's SinoBlog account, the web-born fiction is integrated into the quotidian use of digital media. Interactive blogging tools and communication platforms congregate an online community of serial readers, who are empowered to influence the ongoing production and interpretation of the series. In this way, internet literature emerges as a genre of serial media, with its digital seriality being a condition for active spectatorship and participatory culture on the internet. The serial readers, epitomising the ordinary consumers of serial material and cultural commodities against the backdrop of repetitive capitalist reproduction, consume the trilogy as mundane objects. On the one hand, under the ubiquitous condition of the digital banal, reading the monstrous violence of Eumenides' serial murder is absorbed by unremarkable daily routines in the background. On the other, surrendering to the murderous sublime, the serial readers vicariously participate in Eumenides' acts of vigilante justice. Thus, I believe that the multifaceted cultural phenomenon surrounding Zhou's *Death Notice* trilogy sheds new light on serial spectatorship in the digital era.

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PART 4

Spacetime of Violence



“Blood on the Snow”: Nordic Noir as a Fantasy Travelog

Elana Gomel

1 Fantasy (of) Murders

In 2021, the murder rate in Norway was 0.6 per 100,000 people. In Iceland, it was 0.3. Sweden lamented its crime rates that were twice those of Norway, which is to say around 1.2. By comparison, the murder rate in the US between 2010 and 2022 was approximately 7 per 100,000 with a sharp rise in 2020 to 7.8.¹ So why have such peaceful countries turned to murder as an export commodity? Nordic noir, now recognized in the Anglocentric world as a distinct category of both literary fiction and visual media, has exploded in popularity. Scandinavian writers of crime fiction, such as the Swedes Stieg Larsson and Lars Kepler, the Norwegians Henning Mankel and Jo Nesbo, and the Icelanders, such as Arnaldur Indridason and Yrsa Sigurðardóttir, consistently feature high in the Anglo-American bestseller charts. Netflix has a special category of Nordic noir represented by the highly popular series *Trapped*, *Katla*, and *Bordertown*. To give just one example, Lars Kepler's Joona Linna series has sold 15 million copies in 40 languages.² Most of these novels and movies feature serial killing or at least multiple homicides. If the actual murder rate in Norway or Iceland were equal to its representational ubiquity, these countries would be depopulated by now.

The paradox of Nordic noir, however, is not just the prodigious quantity of fictional corpses the North exports. It lies also in the particular modality of the representation of violence that distinguishes the genre. Consider the opening scene from Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's novel *The Legacy*:

Her head was wound like a mummy in duct tape which obscured her eyes, nose and mouth ... The metal tube of the vacuum cleaner had been forced

1 See <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/10/27/what-we-know-about-the-increase-in-u-s-murders-in-2020/#:~:text=There%20were%207.8%20homicides%20for,the%20terrorist%20attacks%20of%20Sept.>

2 See <https://www.novelsuspects.com/articles/nordic-noir/#:~:text=Nordic%20noir%20has%20only%20increased,million%20copies%20in%2040%20languages.>

down her throat and secured with more tape. The hose snaked down to the vacuum cleaner itself on the floor by the bed (2014, 32).

The outré, grand guignol quality of violence is ubiquitous in Nordic noir. Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's other novels feature corpses with plucked-out eyes, pagan sacrifices, amputated hands and feet floating in a suburban jacuzzi, and gallows erected in the bleak lava fields.³ Lars Kepler's novels display people being buried alive, hacked into pieces, and brainwashed or hypnotized into committing acts of unimaginable cruelty. Wendy Lesser in her personal memoir-cum-critical analysis of Nordic noir draws attention to what she calls the "sadism" of the genre:

I am more conscious of the sadism in my cherished Scandinavian mysteries than I am in any other nation's output, including my own. We Americans have a few writers that excel at the method ... but given the relative amount of violence in our country, we fall far behind the Scandinavians' authorial cruelty when it comes to putting violence on the page. (95)

But what Lesser describes as "sadism" can be reconceptualized as a particular kind of fantasy. I am not using this term in its psychoanalytical sense but rather as a generic category. Fantasy is not merely outré representations of "unrealistic" or "excessive" violence. It is a structured body of narrative conventions that condition both production and reception of fictional texts.

In this chapter, I want to consider Nordic noir as a sub-genre of speculative fiction (SF), and to analyze its storyworlds using the theoretical tools of SF studies: *defamiliarization*, *epistemological ambiguity*, and *ontological drift*. I will argue that despite its origin in the realistic social critique of Scandinavian societies, Nordic noir in its global dispersion has become a liminal genre, drifting ever closer to SF. It creates an imaginary space of violence that is simultaneously exotic and familiar; disturbing and reassuring; phantasmagoric and mimetic.

3 In the following, and for the purposes of clarity, I will refer to Icelandic writers by their first name and patronymic rather than first name only. Iceland is unique in its naming system as most people have no surname. Sigurðardóttir is a patronymic meaning "daughter of Sigurdur". The "exotic" appeal of this system is emphasized in the English translations of Icelandic texts which often contain an explanation and a guide to name pronunciation. This is different from translations of other Nordic writers where a more familiar naming system prevails, even though pronunciation of Norwegian or Swedish words still poses a challenge to the Anglo-American reader.

Robert Saunders describes Nordic noir in terms of "world-building": a term crucial to the theoretical conceptualization of SF. According to Saunders, the visual aesthetics of Nordic noir in popular TV series, generates a unique "reality", distinct from the mimetic representation of criminal violence in a familiar setting:

We can refer to this construction of reality as a form of world-building, an aesthetic-affective process wherein distant and different realms depicted in popular culture shape social understandings, helping viewers map their own emplacement within a globalised, neoliberal milieu. (Saunders 209)

The dividing line between crime fiction and SF is often tenuous, blurred by the existence of hybrid genres, such as urban fantasy with its strong elements of noir (*The Dresden Files* by Jim Butcher) or science-fictional mystery (*Dead Silence* by S.A. Barnes). However, it is still important to make a distinction between mimetic and non-mimetic kinds of writing, even if this distinction relies on what Tzvetan Todorov called "theoretical" rather than "historical" genres.

According to Todorov's definition, theoretical genres are defined by specific structural and thematic features which shape the reader's response to the text. Historical genres, on the other hand, may, or may not, correspond fully to the theoretical paradigms underpinning their production. Moreover, historical genres may change their nature as they develop and evolve, adapting to specific historical and cultural circumstances (Todorov 1990). Genres are not just templates for writing. They are also guidelines for reading. In genre theory, the implied reader of the text is conceptualized as a double of the implied author, guided in their emotional and cognitive reactions by the structural clues of the generic rules. Our relationship with the text is shaped by its genre; and nowhere is this more obvious than in representations of violence. Lesser's "sadism" of Nordic noir does not interfere with her not-so-guilty pleasure of consuming Nordic mysteries precisely because they are perceived as unreal, remote, exotic—in other words, fantastic.

The difference between crime fiction and speculative fiction (SF) resides in the construction of their fictional worlds or storyworlds, to use David Herman's term (Herman 2004).⁴ Speculative fiction is defined by a particular kind

4 There are significant structural and ideological differences among speculative genres: fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Nevertheless, here for my purposes here, the main dividing line is

of storyworld, which is represented as an alternative to the consensus reality of the reader. The fictional worlds of SF always contain what Darko Suvin called a “novum”—that is, an ontological deviation from the consensus reality of the author, significant enough to generate an intratextual experience which the contemporary audience would recognize as “fantastic” (Suvin 1979). The key word in this definition is, of course, “consensus”: since different cultures and historical periods have different ideas about what constitutes reality, SF is always provisional and relative.

The emergence of the contemporary genres of SF, such as Gothic, science fiction, and fantasy, coincided with the splintering of the reality consensus in the West in the long nineteenth century. While literary realism reflected the rationalistic and scientific ethos of the cultural mainstream, SF rebelled against it. From monsters to ghosts, from revealing the dark side of science to escaping into fairylands, SF created multiple literary nova that refused to accept the consensus reality of the modern age.

But while the emergence of crime or mystery fiction also occurred within the same period, initially it did not share SF's rebellious ontology. Mystery, especially in its original form of the classic detective story as codified by Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie, rejected any supernatural intrusion into the “safe” Edwardian world of cause and effect, crime and punishment. Famously, Doyle, a committed spiritualist who participated in countless seances, refused to allow a supernatural solution to any of the Holmes mysteries. When Holmes is confronted with what appears to be a demonic intrusion in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, he rejects a supernatural explanation out of hand. Christie, in enumerating the generic laws of the detective story, specified that no ghosts or monsters were allowed (Symons 1993).

However, the hybrid genres, such as occult detective story, always pushed against the straitjacket of mimetic plausibility. This genetic drift toward SF intensified in the second half of the last century until crime fiction began to deploy narrative strategies that marked its storyworlds as significantly different from consensus reality. In this process, Nordic noir plays a significant and, in my view, underappreciated role. Its unprecedented popularity (especially when contrasted with the relative obscurity of other non-Anglo crime traditions) creates a body of texts that straddles the boundary between mimetic and non-mimetic modalities of writing, appealing to the audiences on both sides of the divide.

between “realistic” crime fiction and these genres; therefore, I am going to use the blanket term speculative fiction to refer to all three and their hybrids, such as slipstream or dark fantasy.

Nordic noir demonstrates what happens when a whole body of crime fiction is transposed from its matrix in a particular linguistic, cultural, and social milieu into a global phenomenon. "Uprooted" from its Nordic particularity, Nordic noir increasingly incorporates narrative elements from such speculative genres as dark fantasy or folk horror. Contemporary Nordic mystery writers explicitly address their texts to international (primarily Anglo-American) audiences. And for these audiences, the genre becomes a sort of fantasy travelogue, a guidebook to the imaginary "North".

It is not uncommon for books that were initially perceived as mimetic or at least corresponding to their culture's consensus reality to be reinterpreted as fantastic. This process, that might be called *fantasy reassignment*, often occurs with historically remote texts. The Epic of Gilgamesh, Iliad or for that matter, the Bible were not perceived as fantasy at the time of their composition, and yet Kathryn Hume's *Fantasy and Mimesis* (1984) lists all of them as such. But Nordic noir is an interesting example of geographical displacement playing the same role as temporal distance. Below, I will consider how the mutually reinforcing loop of global readership and the genre's internal evolution creates the contemporary phenomenon of Nordic noir: a fantasy of violence that manages to be both disturbing and reassuring, both exotic and familiar, both imaginary and mimetic.

There is, of course, no way a short chapter can be a comprehensive survey of the vast (and daily growing) category of Nordic noir. I will mainly focus on two authors: the Icelandic Yrsa Sigurðardóttir and the Swede Lars Kepler.⁵ Besides their international popularity, my reason is that the fantastic elements that are central to my conceptualization of Nordic noir are clearly displayed in these writers' work.

2 Defamiliarizing the North

The concept of *defamiliarization*, first developed by Viktor Shklovsky, has been instrumental in theorizing SF. Here I will use Darko Suvin's adaptation of this concept as *cognitive estrangement*: that is, creation of storyworlds that are perceived as an ontological alternative to the reader's consensus reality. Suvin⁶ describes cognitive defamiliarization as follows:

5 Lars Kepler is the penname of a husband-and-wife writing team, Alexandra Coelho Ahndoril and Alexander Ahndoril.

6 Suvin's SF means specifically science fiction; however, many other scholars have extended the concepts of novum and defamiliarization to other speculative genres.

SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment. (49)

"The North" of Nordic noir is not the actual Nordic countries, but neither is it a wholly fantastic world, such as that of Siri Pettersen's fantasy *Odin's Child* (2013) based on Norse mythology. Rather, the North of the genre is a fictional ontology, constructed for its glocal audiences yet never quite severing its roots in the specific histories and cultures of Scandinavia, Iceland and Greenland.

"Nordic noir" is not an indigenous category. While crime fiction is very popular in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland and Iceland, the blanket label of "Nordic noir" is not normally used within these countries. As Bergman points out, "the gathering of crime novels from Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Norway under one common term tends to overlook the differences between the national traditions, instead stressing a homogeneity that is only partly there" (3). In other words, it is only from the outside that Nordic noir appears as a unified genre with its own narrative conventions, common themes, and a distinctive setting. In fact, the setting is precisely what defines this genre for the global audiences.

Harkema argues that Nordic noir is less of a genre than a style. It is a set of discursive strategies used transculturally to represent violence, corruption, and social decay:

Nordic noir aesthetics [is] a set of techniques to discuss moral, social and philosophical issues that are sometimes culturally or nationally specific ... transnational aesthetics involve a combination of the global or universal and the local ... Jacob Stougaard-Nielsen observes that as a genre Nordic noir only exists in relation to its international audiences: 'Nordic crime fiction is perhaps only 'Nordic' when viewed or read from abroad' even though it has become a successful label or category employed by Scandinavian production companies and publishers. (Harkema 1–2)

The visual style of Nordic noir is familiar to the viewers of TV series such as *The Bridge*, *Trapped*, *The Valhalla Murders*, and *Bordertown*: lowering gray skies; rows of apartment blocks; darkness at midday (or in some case, the opposite—midnight sun); blowing snow, and thick ice. There is a difference between the predominantly urban aesthetics of many Swedish and Danish shows taking place in big cities, and Icelandic shows that often look almost like promotional

videos for the unforgettable Icelandic countryside. But whether urban or rural, there is an unmistakable stylistic quality to the visuals of Nordic noir.

This style is not limited to visual media. In literary fiction as well, the gloomy palette of greys and whites, and the pervasive references to bad weather, snow, and ice constitute one of the most familiar hallmarks of the genre. Waade and Hansen describe the setting of Nordic noir in TV dramas, but their description applies to fiction just as much:

We have also identified very extensive use of climate, season and weather as content features of Nordic Noir, especially what we have termed the beauty of autumn decay, with heavy rain, thick darkness and the many easily distinguishable scenes with flashlight as the only source of light. As a result, a distinctive play with light and shade, night-time cityscape panoramas with artificial lights and flashlight aesthetics become defining traits ... In our analyses, the melancholy of much Nordic Noir drama merges with an obvious influence from Nordic visual art and architecture. (297–298)

Whatever the specificity of geography and language, the North is always "the North": a sort of generalized visual space in which geographical, cultural, and political differences within this area of the world are subsumed into an instantly recognizable series of moody clichés. The setting in Nordic noir "elicits a specific or unique identity or personality" that comes preloaded with a set of assumptions for its global audiences (Avis 129). And these assumptions largely shape the reception of Nordic noir texts, which in turn, influences the narrative conventions of their production.

The visual exoticism of the Arctic landscape is not solely the result of the outsider's gaze. It is not unusual to have a Nordic character to momentarily assume an external point of view, seeing their own locale as strange, malevolent, or frightening. In Ragnar Johansson's *The Girl Who Died* (2021), a teacher from Reykjavik arriving to a tiny Icelandic village in the 1980s experiences the pervasive darkness as creepy and threatening:

Apart from the outside lights twinkling here and there on the houses, the surrounding blackness was almost complete. Una found it oddly unsettling. Although not usually afraid of the dark, she felt suddenly vulnerable, as if anything could happen to her in the gloom (36).

In Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's *The Day is Dark* (2011), her heroine Thora perceives the landscape of Greenland as sublime, beautiful and ominous at the same time,

"The scenery was indescribably beautiful, but at the same time it awakened dread in her heart" (113).

In *The Idea of North*, Peter Davidson explores the "North of the imagination"—the complex of ideas, images, and narratives associated with the Arctic and polar regions of the globe. He argues that the north is not a specific geographic area but rather a direction: "wherever it is located, it points always to a further north, to elsewhere" (loc 56). The North is infested with a "metaphysical horror derived from the sense of otherness" (loc. 777). It is the Hyperborean realm of ice giants and mysterious ancient civilizations; or Vikings and crushing icefields; of disappearing polar expeditions; of hardship, starvation, cannibalism, and savagery. The North is the habitation of monsters: trolls, dark elves, and the Wendigo, "an ogreish and ravenous entity with a heart of ice" (Davidson loc. 1228).

In *The Ice Museum*, Joanna Kavenna combines a travelogue and cultural history to explore the mythical land of Thule, which came to symbolize "the ghastly sublime" in the European imagination (86). Thule, the land of snow and ice, of the eternal night and the Northern lights, was seen by the Nazis as the birthplace of the Aryan race.⁷ But at the same time, Thule also figured in Scandinavian tales of resistance to the Russian invasion of Finland during the Winter War and the Nazi occupation of Norway and Denmark. In the imaginary land of Thule, myth and history are frozen into the landscape itself.

The "endless indeterminacy of myth" shapes the narrative poetics of Nordic noir (Kavenna 1). References to Scandinavian and Icelandic folklore are explicit in many Nordic noir mysteries, but so are references to political mythologies, especially in relation to Nazism and World War 2. Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's Thora Gudmundsdóttir series of novels consistently conflates fantasy and realism, folklore and history, and myth and politics. In *My Soul to Take* (2009), for example, the folkloric monster Útburður, the ghost of an exposed infant, appears to haunt a remote farm, which is also haunted by repressed memories of the Icelandic fascist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. In Henning Mankell's *The Return of the Dancing Master* (2000), Swedish collaboration with the Nazis is the lynchpin of the plot but is also the center of a complex series of mythical references and allusions. In Lars Kepler's Joona Linna series of novels, both Nazism and the Cold War appear as collective ghosts, incarnated in the figure of the almost supernaturally villainous Jurek Walter, the son of a Siberian exile and the detective Joona Linna's nemesis. One can sympathize with Matthew

7 The Thule Society was an occultist organization founded in Germany after World War 1. Many subsequent Nazi luminaries were members, and the political ideology of Nazism was influenced by its mystical discourse centered on the idea of the racially pure North.

Reich, Thora's German lover and collaborator, "Matthew gave such a mighty groan that Thora thought for a moment he was in pain. 'God, the bloody Nazis,' He grumbled. 'They always turn up sooner or later.'" (2009; 245).

Kristinn Schram describes what she calls "borealism": the tendency to "exoticize" the North by lumping all of its inhabitants together "topographically, politically, and culturally" and by erasing the complex legacy of ethnic enmity and colonialism within the Nordic countries, especially in relation to the indigenous Greenlanders, Lapps and Sami people (Gillis and Gudmundsdottir, 5). Nordic noir plays on the ambiguity of its "boreal" setting: both "the shadowy world of the North" and accessible part of the EU; both a symbol of primordial savagery and an incarnation of the modern idea of the welfare state; both realistic and fantastic (Kavenna 4). In her study of the European and American adaptations of Nordic noir TV series *The Bridge*, Isadora Garcia Avis analyses setting as the locus of "'glocalization'" (that is, the symbiosis between the global and the local, or the specific and the universal) and points out that the cultural translation of the series involves the change in both locale and landscape that shifts its overall meaning, despite preserving the structure of the plot. Thus, setting is what creates the generic distinctiveness of Nordic noir, but this setting is not merely a representation of the actual geographic area of Scandinavia, Iceland, and Greenland. Rather, it is a semi-fantastic storyworld imbued with fictional violence and brimming with echoes of the half-forgotten histories of Europe. The North is uncanny in the Freudian sense of the word: *unheimlich* or homely and unhomely at the same time.

3 From Welfare to Wonderland

The first writers to bring Scandinavian crime fiction to the attention of the Anglo-American audiences were Per Wahlöö and Maj Sjöwall whose series of ten novels featuring the police detective Martin Beck was published between 1965 and 1976. The authors certainly did not think of their novels as fantasy; in fact, they were explicitly meant as social critique. Both committed Marxists, Wahlöö and Sjöwall set out to document the collapse of the Swedish welfare state through their exploration of crime and violence. Wry, plainly written, and hard-hitting, these novels, especially *The Laughing Policeman* (1968), created a template for Nordic noir as a police procedural.

But while in Sweden itself their novels were read as criticizing the way "Sweden was turning into an increasingly capitalistic, harsh and brutal society where the class divides were growing", many readers in the US saw them as almost utopian (Bergman 20). Lesser nostalgically reminisces about the way

the “small, sensible nation” with no guns and extensive social services as depicted in the Martin Beck novels represented to her “a form of humane, non-Soviet socialism” during the rise of Reagan (9).

This creative misreading, in which mimetic storyworlds of Scandinavian crime fiction were transposed into a defamiliarizing device for the socio-political reality of the US, has impacted Nordic noir in interesting ways. It is not uncommon to find Nordic noir texts which adopt a sort of quasi-American perspective on their own represented reality. This creates a double defamiliarization: emphasizing the “exoticism” of Nordic societies for American readers, while also representing the US as the Other of Europe. References to American popular culture are often used for this purpose. In Yrsa Sigurðardóttir *The Absolution* (2019), the Icelandic cop Huldar weighs what to watch on television:

What was he supposed to watch? A cop show from America where his job was done by geniuses? Or the Nordic version, in which cops were collapsing under the weight of their own failings? (214)

This wryly metafictional comparison illuminates the dynamics of mutual (mis)translation of American thrillers and Nordic noir, and of the cross-cultural currents between the US and the Nordic countries. *The Absolution* is the second book in a series of novels dealing with social issues in Iceland. This series, collectively titled *The Children's House*, features two sleuths: Huldar and Freyja, the latter a clinical psychologist working with abused and exploited children. Both of them are far from “geniuses”: Huldar is impulsive and easily distracted; Freyja is struggling economically and burdened by taking care of her jailed petty-criminal brother. The implicit juxtaposition of the novel with the typical American cop show seems to emphasize what Lesser sees as the essential “humanity” and “a kind of social egalitarianism” of Nordic noir, in which “detectives generally seem indifferentiable, as individuals and as a class, from the population they serve” (35). And just as Huldar and Freyja are depicted as ordinary Icelanders, the crimes they are called upon to solve initially seem to echo the stereotype of the rare and easily solvable Icelandic murder, “Unlike their counterparts in big cities abroad, Icelandic murderers were normally still standing over the body when the police arrived” (2019, 200).

However, this is not what happens in *The Absolution* and the rest of the *Children's House* series. The murders in the series' novels are sophisticated, intricately planned, and difficult to solve. While having their roots in actual social problems, such as dysfunction in foster care (*The Legacy*), bullying (*The Absolution*), sexual abuse at home (*The Reckoning*), social media (*Gallows Rock*),

addiction (*The Doll*), the novels in this series are not engaged in social critique in the vein of Wahlöö and Sjöwall. Rather, they create a transnational imaginary space in which American and Nordic modalities of violence constantly reference each other as both counterparts and mirror reflections.

Nordic noir "is constituted by a history of adaptation and appropriation" (Badley et al, 1). In their book, Badley and her co-editors explore the transnational and transmedia appeal of Nordic noir and in particular, the way in which it both absorbs and influences the "fundamental noir elements" originating in the classic American crime movies of the 1940s, such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (11). But one can also consider adaptation as an ideological and cultural strategy, in which "foreign" elements are appropriated to a domestic agenda. The Nordic welfare state, for example, was a talking point in the American presidential primaries of 2020 despite the fact that most voters had a very rudimentary understanding of what it is. Numerous references to American crime (and American crime shows) in Nordic noir indicate a similar misreading of American society as uniquely violent. Meeting in the narrative space of a mystery novel, these crosscurrents of "adaptation and appropriation" generate a dynamic of mutual defamiliarization of American and Scandinavian societies and cultures.

However, the Anglo-American domination of the global publishing market creates an unequal power balance between the two. The advent of social media makes American pop culture instantly accessible everywhere. Most people in the Nordic countries speak English; most Americans speak no foreign languages at all, let alone Swedish or Icelandic. Defamiliarization at work in Nordic noir texts is correspondingly skewed: the "exotic" aspects of the Nordic countries is much more striking to the American readers than vice versa.

4 The Mirror Men

In his classic study *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973), Tzvetan Todorov describes the fantastic as the genre perpetually suspended between a mimetic and a non-mimetic explanation of the seemingly impossible events of the plot. The main feature of the fantastic is *epistemological ambiguity*, as the storyworld vacillates between two incompatible modalities:

First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and supernatural explanation of events described. Second, this hesita-

tion may also be experienced by a character; thus, the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations. (25)

The relationship between the fantastic and fantasy (or speculative fiction in general) has been hotly debated. But here it is enough to point out that while the two are not synonymous, SF often incorporates the epistemological ambiguity of the fantastic, creating a "flickering" storyworld, which cannot be quite pinned down to either natural or supernatural ontology.

In the second novel of Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's Thora series *My Soul to Take*, the Icelandic legend of the Útburðir, the ghost of an exposed newborn, constitutes the backbone of the plot, which revolves around the cold case of the murder of a little girl. Thora retells the legend:

It is the story of a mother who left her infant outside to die. Some years later she had another daughter, whom she raised. When the girl reached marriageable age, a young man asked for her hand and they were betrothed. At the height of the wedding ceremony, there was a banging at the window, and the guests heard this verse chanted: 'Kerns I should have cast, a farm was meant for me, I should have been wed, just like thee' ... It was the ghost of the dead child, speaking to her sister. (2010, 388)

Throughout the novel, the Útburður haunts the bleak countryside of an isolated farm where the body of the girl is found. People claim to hear the wailing of the abandoned babies in the lava fields presided over by a haunted glacier. It seems that the novel is basically a ghost story, much like Sigurðardóttir's explicitly supernatural novel *I Remember You*, which also features the ghost of an abandoned child.

But while in *I Remember You* the ghost is real within the storyworld of the novel, *My Soul to Take* makes a sharp U-turn toward the end. The killer is revealed to have been the girl's uncle and his motive is depressingly mundane: money and the inheritance of the farm. However, this conclusion does not fully dispel the fantastic nature of the text created by the sustained epistemological ambiguity of the events. The bleak and ominous atmosphere of the novel generates an underlying "wound" in reality which is only imperfectly sutured by the rational explanation. In other Nordic noir novels as well, the borderline between natural and supernatural is deliberately undermined by the seemingly

inexplicable events of the plot, the characters' reactions, and especially, the arctic landscape saturated with mythical and folkloric references.

Yrsa Sigurdardottir's *The Day is Dark* (2011), for example, takes place in the arctic realm exotic even to Icelanders themselves: Greenland. A mysterious disappearance at a drilling station in Greenland generates a tense and claustrophobic situation which is uncannily similar to what happens in *I Remember You*. There, a group of people unwittingly isolated at a deserted island off the coast of Iceland are relentlessly hunted down by the malevolent ghost of an abused child. In *The Day is Dark*, it seems throughout the novel that the series of disappearances and murders at the station are the fault of the Tupilak, a Greenlandic spirit also connected to exposed and dead infants. The dream-like atmosphere in which the line between natural and supernatural becomes hopelessly blurred is incapsulated in Thora's sense of the station being haunted:

In the morning she was unsure of whether it had actually happened or whether it had been part of the dream she'd been having; a dream about the people who settled this country a long time ago in the hope of a better life, but who had reaped only hunger, hardship, and a sad death. (2012; 109)

The epistemological ambiguity in Nordic noir is linked to the mythology, folklore, and history of the North. The supernatural is more than just the ghost of a private tragedy. It saturates the dark landscape of the Arctic, responding to its unique nature and exceptional history. In Ragnar Johansson's *The Girl Who Died*, for example, the bleak Icelandic countryside reverberates with echoes of dark fairy tales:

She had heard so many folk tales over the years about unexplained forces, stories people told each other down the centuries in this dark, forbidding country. And while she didn't believe in anything like that, you could never be entirely sure. (79)

In its evocation of the "monsters of rock and snow", Nordic noir resembles another SF genre: folk horror (Davidson loc. 3903). Folk horror, initially emerging as a cinematic subgenre in the British horror cinema, has recently risen to popularity in fiction writing as well:

At the most basic level, then, folk horror is rooted in the dark 'folk tale', in communal stories of monsters, ghosts, violence, and sacrifice that occupy the threshold between history and fiction. The function of folklore in folk

horror texts is complex, but it is nonetheless critical to the task of defining folk horror Indeed, folk horror is distinctive in rooting its horror in the local community bound together by inherited tales (Keetley 2020).

Keetley stresses that the “local community” in folk horror does not have to be an actual isolated village with authentic rituals going back thousands of years, as represented in such movies as *Midsummer* or *The Wicker Man*. Indeed, the “folk” in folk horror is, as often as not, a projection of the cosmopolitan culture’s mixed nostalgia and apprehension of its own half-forgotten local history. The rural margins are a dream of the urban center.

Another way in which epistemological ambiguity becomes entrenched in Nordic noir is through the uncanny relationship between the detective and the perpetrator. Nordic noir, like all the other varieties of crime fiction, is structured around the triad of detective-perpetrator-victim.⁸ But the function of the detective in Nordic noir has evolved in a way different from American crime fiction. While in the latter, the detective is (still) a heroic figure whose quick thinking and/or prowess with guns unmasks the perpetrator, the role of the detective in Nordic noir is becoming increasingly ambiguous, as they function either as a sort of guide to the storyworld or as a mirror image of the perpetrator, collapsing the narrative and ethical distance between the two. The detective is both an insider and an outsider; both “normal” and exceptional; both familiar and strange.

In Per Wahlöö’s and Maj Sjöwall’s novels, Martin Beck is a sort of Nordic Everyman: decent, middle-class, somewhat unhappy in his family life, but dutiful and socially conscious. Henning Mankell’s Kurt Wallander and Arlandur Indridason’s Inspector Erlendur are cast in the same mold: melancholic, prone to brooding, with complicated and dysfunctional family situations, but still firmly part of the social order of their respective countries, upholding their shared values. This, however, changes as Nordic noir becomes an international phenomenon.

In Yrsa Sigurðardóttir’s *Huldar* and *Freyja* novels, the detective function is split between a male and a female character, both of whom are at odds with their bureaucracies (law enforcement and child protection services respectively). In fact, they only solve the bone-chilling crimes they investigate because each helps the other push against the entrenched procedures, values, and

8 These are what is called in narratology “character functions” rather than individual characters. Each character function may be fulfilled by more than one character, and each character may fulfill more than once function.

assumptions of their organizations. Each becomes the necessary outsider for the other: the situation replicated in Viveca Sten's Sandhamn novels, in which the male policeman Thomas Andreasson needs the help of his childhood friend, attorney Nora Linde, to be able to overcome the institutional boundaries of the police organization.

In Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's second series of novels, centered around the attorney Thora Gudmundsdóttir, she solves gruesome murders, often verging on the supernatural, with the help of her German lover Matthew Reich. Both outsiders, she by virtue of her profession which automatically places her on the side of the very criminals she is supposed to unmask, and he because of his origin (not to mention the inability to speak Icelandic), they are situated on the margins of the Icelandic legal structure. Much like Freyja and Huldar, Thora often uses her position to deliver a sharp-tongued critique of the country's system, especially after the 2010 economic collapse.

But compared to other contemporary Nordic detectives, the Icelandic sleuths are exceptionally "normal." Jo Nesbo's Harry Hole is an alcoholic, constantly embroiled in clashes with his police superiors. Stieg Larsson's Lisbeth Salander is a hacker and a violent sociopath. And perhaps on the furthest edge of the spectrum of exceptionality is Lars Kepler's Joona Linna: a Finn living and working in Sweden, where he is eventually kicked out of the police for violence and insubordination and becomes homeless. Linna is one of those cop "geniuses" mocked by Huldar. He has an unshakeable belief that his deductions are always right—and they always are. Already in the first book of the Joona Linna series *The Hypnotist* (2009) where the bizarre circumstances of his original trauma are only hinted at, he is represented as exceptionally bright and successful—but also mysterious and aloof:

Joona Linna's colleagues at the National Criminal Investigation Department will tell you they admire him, and they do, but they also envy him. And they will tell you they like him, and they do, but they also find him aloof (Kepler 2009; 22).

In an interview after *The Hypnotist* was published to great acclaim, Alexandra Coelho and Alexander Ahndoril, the married couple behind the penname of Lars Kepler, explain:

Joona Linna is our hero; he is the main character for the whole series. In each book we will get to know him better, come closer to his own mystery, and understand why he is so stubborn, why he never can leave a case unsolved, and why saving families obsesses him (Kepler 2009; 509–510).

They have kept this promise: the entire hugely successful series (9 books so far) can be seen as a sort of biography of Joona Linna, slowly unfolding into a noir meta-narrative where he is simultaneously the victim (his father and his partner are murdered; and his family have to go into hiding for fear of his nemesis, a serial killer and supervillain Jurek Walter); the detective (investigating a new, progressively more outré case in every book); and in a Gothic doppelgänger fashion, the criminal, as he becomes more and more violent and unhinged. But what additionally sets him apart is his ethnicity. Linna is a Finn living and working in Sweden. His accent and his appearance are “exotic” to his Swedish colleagues: he is first described as the “blond man ... with pale eyes as gray as polished granite” (2009; 8). But of course, his white-blond hair, lean physique and gray eyes are precisely the American stereotype of “the Nordic”. He is an outsider for those on the inside; an insider for those on the outside.

In Kepler's books, Linna's exotic origins are emphasized, especially in the dreamlike sequence in the first book where he goes into the ethnic museum to gaze at the Sami bridal headdress, “sewn by descendants of indigenous people from the Scandinavian peninsula” (Kepler 2009; 141). He does it to remember his own wife, but in the context of the novel where the fate of his family is not revealed, the episode becomes one of the focal points of the intrusion of “borealism” into a police procedural. And yet, the episode is undoubtedly read differently by the Swedish and Anglo-American audiences, each of them bringing their own knowledge and assumptions to interpret Joona's exceptionality. What remains invariant, though, in this process of cultural (mis)translation is the exceptionality itself.

I have discussed in *Bloodscripts* how in the classic detective story, the detective and the criminal act as mirror images of each other: both outsiders, they uphold the social order by their mutual exclusion from it. As in *Dexter*, the epitome of this convention, only a monster can catch other monsters. The themes of doubling, doppelgängers, mirror reflections, and twinship structure the plots of Kepler's novels. In *Lazarus*, the seventh book in the series, Jurek Walter, Linna's nemesis and a “genius” serial killer, escapes detention and proceeds to wreak havoc in the name of avenging his twin brother. The twins, originally refugees from the USSR, have been mistreated by the Swedish welfare state, and Jurek, in his campaign of vengeful terror that involves burying his victims alive, positions their graves to correspond to the constellation Gemini. Only by identifying with Jurek can Joona find out where the next victim is buried, so in a perverse way, he becomes Jurek's missing twin, a substitute for his brother:

'Sometimes I understand his way of thinking,' he says in a low voice ... 'It's the twins,' Joona says ... 'That's how he remembers where the graves are. Each grave corresponds to a star in the constellation' (Kepler 2020; 354).

The last (so far) book in the series, *The Mirror Man* (2022), features a killer who is literally two men in the same body. With Joona having been pushed to the margins of society, while the criminals appear to be more and more exceptional, the entire series appears to spiral toward a Gothic hall of infinite reflections, in which the triad of criminal-detective-victim is collapsed into a monstrous unity, "He mumbled something incoherent about mirrors placed in front of other mirrors, creating an endless wormhole expanding and shrinking like the bellows of a bagpipe" (Kepler 2022; 423).

The progressively more fantastic exploits of Joona, Thora, and other Scandinavian sleuths seem to propel Nordic noir toward SF. But the more exceptional the detective becomes, the less are they capable of representing Scandinavian societies. For the global audience, Martin Beck is stranger than Lisbeth Salander or Joona Linna. The latter are global stereotypes: the violent hacker and the rebellious cop. Maverick detectives and socially conscious criminals have become a stable and expected part of what Lesser calls her "fictional Scandinavia"—the "imaginary region" where violence is both ubiquitous and exceptional; both disturbing and cozy; both like, and unlike, the American reality of everyday crime (24–25). The more fantastic the world of Nordic noir becomes, the more acceptable it is to global audiences. And the conflation of the detective and the criminal only adds a Gothic veneer to what is already as far from the Marxist social critique of Wahlöö and Sjöwall as Martin Beck is from Joona Linna.

5 From Criminals to Ghosts

The third feature of Nordic noir that justified labeling it as SF lies in what I call *ontological drift*: the tendency of its storyworlds to come ever closer to the impossible storyworlds of fantasy and science fiction without ever crossing the dividing line. As I pointed out above, the fantastic nature of any storyworld is measured by its distance from the consensus reality of its audience. However, when the audience becomes global, the nature of this distance changes as well, and the text hovers between several consensus realities, engaging in a complex negotiation with its multiple implied readers.

Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's first novel in the Thora series, *Last Rituals* (2007), centers around a rare edition of *The Witch Hammer*, a medieval manual of witch-

hunting. It starts with a badly mutilated body of a German student and proceeds to deal with black magic, body modification, and recreational S&M. It also deals with Thora's everyday life as a recently divorced single mother of two whose teenaged son has gotten his girlfriend pregnant. In the disjunction between the cozy domesticity of her life and the macabre nature of the crime lies a key to the series' success.

Andrew Nestingen argues that the emergence of fantasy and science fiction in Scandinavian countries in the 1990s as autonomous and self-aware genres is one of the signs of the splintering of the national consensus (which, of course, took different forms in different countries). Fantastic texts, such as Johanna Sinsalo's *The Troll* "engage with debates over individualism, collective claims, and the status of national homogeneity, gender and transnational relations" (14). But before the crystallization of Scandinavian SF as a distinct genre, crime fiction filled the niche assigned to science fiction and fantasy in the Anglo-American literary field.

In addition to the Martin Beck series, Wahlöö and Sjöwall wrote a fantastic dystopia *Murder on the 31st Floor* (1966). *The Lake of the Dead* by Andre Bjerke (1942) is simultaneously a ghost story and one of the first crime novels in Norway. Jo Nesbo's Harry Hole novel *The Devil's Star* (2012) involves what appears to be devil worship and demonic possession. Ragnar Jonasson's *The Girl Who Died* and the Swedish writer Camilla Sten's *The Lost Village* (2020) and *The Resting Place* (2022) verge on claustrophobic haunted-house horror, though eventually offering a naturalistic explanation. And eventually, the epistemological ambiguity is resolved on the side of the supernatural, creating a decidedly non-mimetic storyworld, as in Yrsa Sigurðardóttir's standalone novel *I Remember You*, in which the criminal is a bona fide ghost.

As elements of the ghost story, fairy tale and folk horror penetrate what began as social realistic genre, Nordic noir joins international fantasy as a dream (or a nightmare) of globalization. The increasing violence of Nordic noir, disconnected from the crime statistics of its countries of origin, serves as an imaginary space in which transnational issues of identity, history, abuse and exploitation, and trauma and memory can be explored and reenacted. And yet, the main reason why this space is so attractive to audiences everywhere, but particularly in Europe and the US, is because it is shaped by the "idea of the North", deeply embedded in the Western imagination. Both realistic and fantastic, both local and global, Nordic noir is the travelogue of the North that has never existed.

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***“Le immagini ti guardano”*: The Gallery City in the Giallo Genre of Italian Cinema**

Peter Vorissis

À une passante

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d’une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l’ourlet;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l’ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair ... puis la nuit!—Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m’a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?

Ailleurs, bien loin d’ici! trop tard! jamais peut-être!
Car j’ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!



Charles Baudelaire’s poem “To a Passerby” encapsulates a certain kind of urban encounter—a fugitive glimpse of a stranger passing on the street. This is one of his *Tableaux parisiens* (1861), in which urban encounters and experiences are, as the title suggests, metaphorical “paintings.” Baudelaire understands the apparition and the viewing of particular striking elements as resulting in a transformation of the modern city—overfull, teeming, estranging—into a sort of picture gallery. But while he produces a graceful and fascinating image of this

passerby, there is an emptiness at the core of the poem itself—the absence of its subject, the eponymous *'passante.'* Reduced from the start by an anonymizing title, the woman on the street is further flattened through an aestheticizing, sculptural impulse towards salvaging beauty from impermanence. The identity of the real individual is subsumed entirely by the image she evokes. More than an active participant in the creation of an image, the female body becomes, in this text, material support for a mental artistic operation and a victim of representational violence. Baudelaire is, however, aware of the objectified woman's subjectivity and transmits it via an instantaneous glance, a flashing in the eyes ("A gleam ... then night"); her gaze is that which is ultimately irrepressible, irreducible to the condition of the *objet d'art*. Her eye is a "livid sky where the hurricane is born," from which the narrator draws "The softness that fascinates and the pleasure that kills." The first-person narration might seem to occlude any glimpse of her agency, though in these lines we see that she does, indeed, *act* upon the narrator, not through the movements of her immobilized body, but rather through the power of her gaze confronting his. He is "fascinated" then "killed" by it, language that depicts him as falling victim to this look, and finally, "reborn" by her glance. The final line of the poem sets up an equilibrium: two individuals detached from the crowd¹ by mutual glances, both rendered subject *and* object through this encounter. Instead of emerging purely as an image devoid of life, grammatically, the passerby becomes both object ("you whom I would have loved") and subject ("you who knew it"); even when she is the object of the narrator's gaze, he is verbally mired in the imperfect subjunctive ("que j'eusse aimée"), whereas she has much more actively, *really* seen him and 'known' his desire ("qui le savais").

The shocking effect of self-estrangement that her gaze has upon the narrator is conveyed through language that brings together the psychological and the physical: "In isolating his self from the world, the poet also isolates it from his body, which assumes a petrified position ('crispé comme un extravagant' ['tense as in a delirium'])" (DalMolin 2000), transforming the poet himself into an image. What is so troubling about the poetic image in this context is its ability to look back and to enact its own violence upon its maker. In this chapter, I would like to suggest that by exploring this same dynamic, the cinematic works

1 See Eliane Françoise DalMolin, *Cutting the Body: Representing Woman in Baudelaire's Poetry, Truffaut's Cinema, and Freud's Psychoanalysis*, where she describes the passerby as emblematic of "the fragmented woman in Baudelaire's poetry," focusing on his use of punctuation in particular to cut and mark the body of the text and to reinforce the violence of his gaze.

of the contemporary Italian filmmaker Dario Argento exemplify a Baudelairean urban poetics. Ross Chambers outlines this novel poetics, which he describes as a response to the new, omnipresent background noise of the city, a way of generating images from the chaos of urban life. Chambers describes what this poem does (like other *Tableaux parisiens*) as centering on the creation and situation of figures (including our passerby) singled out in the public spaces of the city like works of sculpture, invested with allegorical significance, and forming loci in time and space that function as hyper-charged poetic centers. The goal of this poetic project is the "disalienation" of the urban subject—the viewer in the street, the writer, and the poem's readers—a coming-to-awareness of one's existential alienation from/within this built environment. It is through the uncanniness of these sculptural figures encountered on the streets that this condition reveals itself, and that our shifted relations to and occupation of time and space can be most acutely felt.² One can locate, in Argento's *gialli*, precisely these sorts of alienating figures, along with ubiquitous paintings, sculptures, and reflections. They create a vision of the city as a gallery space of encounter, deliberately framed by its architecture, in which one is inevitably confronted with otherness, in which the image has the special power to return the gaze cast upon it.

1 The Cinematic *Giallo* and Urban Spaces

The *giallo* is a very particular Italian hybrid horror/mystery thriller, especially noted for its Grand Guignol-esque gore, often Freudian preoccupations with aberrant psychologies, and striking visual style, encompassing elaborate camera movements, peculiar angles, and expressionistic lighting. The cinematic *giallo*'s metonymic name—the famous yellow covers of Mondadori's crime thrillers and mysteries chromatically signifying the oftentimes similar narrative content of the films—underscores the subgenre's intertextual nature, but it also serves as a reminder of the restrictions placed upon it by generic conventions; in fact, the use of the designation *giallo* for these films (especially insofar as they developed over the sixties, seventies, and eighties into distinctively lurid, baroque works transgressing into the darker territory of horror movies) represents a restraint in and of itself, aligning them with mystery literature with which they share certain attributes, but from which they also diverge significantly.

2 See Ross Chambers, *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise*.

Similarly, one might compare the *giallo* with the film noir, another heavily stylized mystery genre with literary roots, in which the French critic Nino Frank located “a new type of crime film that would render obsolete the traditional detective film with its emphasis on plot convolutions and the unmasking of the killer, through a radical visual style, a complex mode of narration, and a pronounced interest in the characters’ ‘uncertain psychology’” (Spicer 2002, 2). While *gialli* are noted for their formally inventive visual style, they are also renowned for their often *very* convoluted plots and, in the majority of cases, the “unmasking of the killer” is equally the obsession of the protagonist, who goes to great and perilous lengths to accomplish this, and of the film, which disguises its antagonist with leather gloves, hats, and long coats. *Gialli* generally do not employ “first-person voice-overs, multiple narrators, flashbacks and ellipses” (Spicer 2002, 4) and instead focus on a less verbal, more visual style of storytelling that utilizes zooms, tracking shots, and visual motifs to simulate the acts of looking and piecing together images. And while there is a pronounced “Freudian” (Spicer 2002, 4) angle in many *gialli*, it appears not so much in the form of a psychologically “uncertain” narrator as in that of an antagonist whose motivations and actions are clearly meant to be read as “aberrant”; likewise, the strange, menacing world of *gialli* is not so much an Existentialist vision in which “there are no values or moral absolutes” (Spicer 2002, 2) as it is a heightened sphere stalked by clear manifestations of evil and haunted by the pervasive presence of violent death. In as many ways as the colorful *giallo* echoes the approach of film noir, then, it also seems to depart radically from it.

From the subgenre’s inauguration to its zenith, the cinematic *giallo* concerned itself with and carefully represented, implicitly and explicitly, its own nature as a bounded object. This self-reflexiveness manifests itself in the films’ preoccupation with vision and visuality in general, and with artworks in particular—paintings, sculptures, frames, mirrors, photographs, all become points of reference essential to the resolution of the diegetic mystery and to the filmmakers’ larger thematic programs. Mikel J. Koven notes that “many *gialli* confine themselves within clearly bounded spaces. Some restrict their action to apartment blocks or college campuses” (Koven 2006, 52). This holds true despite the fact that many *gialli* are emphatically urban in nature. If artistic representations of the city often trade in notions of endless possibility figured across vast stretches of constructed space, the ways in which characters in *gialli* experience the urban setting calls this into question; *gialli* concentrate on, and revel in, deviant individual movement (or immobility) and reshape their urban settings to reflect these conditions. Their protagonists find themselves in cities deformed and warped through the genre’s unique aesthetics so that they

come to resemble physical manifestations of the psychological derangement of investigators and murderers alike.

Mario Bava's *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* (*The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, 1963) is often considered to be the initiating film of the genre. Importantly, it "is the film that founded the genre of the Italian giallo from the point of view of the figure of the protagonist as eye witness and of urban representation" (Acerbo & Pisoni 2007, 117).³ Its heroine, Nora Davis, is a young American traveling to Rome for the first time, excited at the prospect of visiting this city full of cultural touchstones. This is another trope that will become well-established in subsequent *gialli*: the pointed use of "foreigners and outsiders ... [to] fulfill certain character roles, and part of this cinema's ambivalence lies in these liminal roles" (Koven 2006, 55). The *giallo* presents liminal characters and traces their movements across a variety of thresholds both physical and psychological, and in so doing, it mimics itself. It reflexively considers its own position as a bounded object located at the generic limits of mystery and horror, and thinks about the way in which it thereby effects a productive cross-contamination: clues, investigations, and logic give form to the emotional chaos of terror, while oversaturated blood stains seep through and add a tinge of irrationality to otherwise formulaic, black-and-white crime narratives.

La ragazza emphasizes from the first the role of the city in its story: "in terms of its *mise en scène*, the basis for the treatment of space across the entire genre is defined in this film: an unsettling nocturnal Rome shot in expressionistic lighting, in which even the super-touristic steps of the Piazza di Spagna become the grim theater for an attack" (Acerbo & Pisoni 2007, 115). The film plays with Hollywood-influenced imagery of Rome, drawing notably from William Wyler's *Roman Holiday* (1953), lampooning these snapshots through jarring juxtapositions of, on the one hand, romantic montages of a couple at monuments like the Forum and the Colosseum, and on the other, scenes of murder and investigation at the Spanish Steps, rendered sinister through Bava's black-and-white chiaroscuro and canted, noir-esque camera angles. The romanticized images of a touristic Rome, warped in the ensuing crime narrative, are clearly based upon the visual referent of the picture postcard; their lighting (sunny, pleasant) and their subjects (historical buildings, picturesque streets) derive from a photographic tradition that in turn owes much to painting (for example, Turner's gauzy, glowing vistas of Roman ruins). The cinematic *giallo* emerges from a consideration of the creative transformation and conditioning of urban spaces through works of art and individual psychological experience, and presents us

3 Citations from Acerbo & Pisoni are the author's translations from the Italian.

with alternating glimpses of phantom cities cohabiting these spaces. Rather than being merely a mystery story set in Rome, *La ragazza* is a movie largely *about* the city itself, how it can be viewed through various distorting cultural lenses (of romantic movies or detective fiction) and how these aestheticizing imaginative tendencies come into conflict with one another and shape one's experience of real places and people.

In *La ragazza*, Bava explores constraint thematically, questioning the restrictions imposed upon his characters by narrative and genre, while Argento goes in more for a strategy of formal alienation. His *gialli* maintain a peculiar oneiric aesthetics, contributing to his drift towards the horror genre. The rationality of space and the logic of visual perception are almost entirely swept away by floods of unrealistically red blood and a prevailing atmosphere of dread projected upon the characters' surroundings. His camera focuses obsessively upon architecture and constructed urban space. "Argento himself often speaks of buildings as living organisms" (Carluccio 2003, 58),⁴ and frequently it seems as if the elaborate set pieces that take place within striking structures are equally organic, integrating the films' narratives inextricably into their surroundings. Often, the idiosyncratic decorative and structural details Argento focuses on visually parallel the action taking place within these buildings—for example, a shot from the top of a stairwell positions a murder victim within its strange, sharp triangle, foreshadowing her demise by blade in the elevator in *L'Uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, 1970); in the pivotal art gallery scene from the same film, the protagonist is framed between glass doors, dramatically shoring up his status as witness and immobilizing him as if within an enormous *tableau*. Argento psychologizes space, turning it surreal and mirroring his characters'—victims and killers alike—inward and outward trajectories, transforming places that ought to be recognizable (if not as specific structures, then at least as realistic *types* of places) into nightmarish manifestations of the violence both physical and emotional that always undergirds the films; mirrors are important thematically in his work, but they also serve as a model for the spaces that Argento uses to set his action, which become, after a fashion, enchanted reflective surfaces. Argento works within extant and tangible spatial frameworks, but invests them with cinematic signifiers of their otherworldliness—eerily floating curtains, disturbing paintings or sculptures, rays and flashes of vivid scarlet or yellow light. It is not that the spaces in which Argento's films take place are totally *created* by the mind itself (indeed, they are often real locations rather than sets), but rather that they are reworked,

4 Citations from Carluccio are the author's translations from the Italian.

distorted, dyed by the mind's eye. That much of this cinematic 'remodeling' is superficial in nature, painted over pre-existing spaces in a blatant exercise in artifice, points to the *giallo's* focus on constraint and ways of getting around it, or perhaps getting *over* it, and helps to define the city as a zone of endlessly shifting, changing surfaces, as if always staging new exhibitions.

2 Framed Images: Sight, Space, and Eyewitnesses

Early in Argento's *Profondo rosso* (*Deep Red*, 1975), in the scene that serves as the plot's catalyst, protagonist Marc Daly witnesses a murder from a *piazza* in Rome. This *piazza*—the Piazza CLN—is real, but is actually located in Torino. Argento's composition also includes the important (fictional, specially constructed) location in the film known as the 'Bluebar,' a piano bar located in the *piazza*, where Marc's friend Carlo works. Argento draws attention to the incongruity of its presence, even for those unfamiliar with the two Italian cities, for the 'Bluebar' is a duplication of the diner from Edward Hopper's 1942 painting *Nighthawks*. Not only does the design of the bar explicitly mimic that in the painting, but Argento also brings the occupants of the space to eerie stillness, a *tableau vivant* surfacing in the nighttime city. As Marc and Carlo listen to the cries of Helga Ullman (a psychic being murdered in her apartment above) from the empty square, the people behind the bar's large plate glass windows barely move an inch in the background. Carluccio identifies Argento as, "an artist who sees and makes visible an ideal place starting with a modification, an alteration, as it were, of reality, from a different way of looking at it and putting it together," and reads the *piazza* scene as "a way of seeing and making visible more than what objective reality seems to offer to our perception"—a "synthesis of objective and subjective, real and imaginary (a real, objective, historical *piazza* in Torino, and the subjective hallucination of a painting, a work of art)" (Carluccio 2007, 57). If Argento's phantasmagoric depictions of architecture and urban spaces are "hyperreal" (Carluccio 2007, 57), it is because they more accurately represent the dual physiological *and* psychological nature of perception, and so his aesthetics of alienation turns back around on itself and prompts his viewers to recognize in it something oddly approaching the reality of the way they see the world. In many *gialli*, these idiosyncratic or divergent elements (subjective memories, imagery, and sentiments) take the concrete form of works of art installed in the diegetic spaces the characters inhabit.

The stillness of the Bluebar's occupants communicates in simple visual terms the incommunicability of Marc Daly's predicament; as a witness to a violent crime, he feels alone, and is alone, marked as the protagonist of the

film's mystery and destined to resolve it on his own. It is also an elegant condensation of the broader indifference of the collective urban populace to the plight of individual citizens, and of its broader superficiality contrasted with the "hyperreal" and "prolonged" reality experienced by the occupant of a space for whom it takes on a more specialized meaning through the extraordinary events taking place within it. The piazza in *Profondo rosso* is also an example of the Malrauxian *musée imaginaire*,⁵ adding to this location not only a recreation of the Hopper painting, but also a monumental fountain with an enormous, sculpted human form, a menorah turned into a decorative motif in Helga's flat, and her hallways of haunting, Munch-like portraits. Characters in *gialli* exist in a world overpopulated by, defined by images and by their artifice. Argento also displays an obsession with windows and mirrors. In the piazza scene alone, there are the large plate glass windows of the 'Bluebar,' a hallway lined in glass-covered prints and gilt-edged mirrors, the shining blade of the killer's cleaver, and fatally glass-encased Helga, first calling desperately for help by banging her fists against a window, then pushed up against and *through* it by the black-gloved hand of the killer. One could easily draw up similar lists from all of Argento's films.

In *L'Uccello*, the eyewitness scene is, appropriately enough, a mirror image of the piazza scene. Here, Sam Dalmas, an American, is walking home when he notices a struggle between two people in an art gallery. At first, what he sees is not at all clear; the initial distance and his perspective let him see just the lower halves of the involved parties' bodies, and because of the presence of a statue to their right, it appears as if there may actually be three people. Drawing closer, Sam enters a large glass vestibule separating the main gallery from the street, just in time to see the trenchcoated, black-gloved assailant running into a back room and leaving behind a woman in white, who has been stabbed. He wishes to help her, but ultimately cannot because the second door leading to her will not open. Sam himself becomes a victim as the killer remotely locks the outer sliding glass door, trapping him in the vestibule between the street and

5 The *musée imaginaire*, a concept popularized by French author, art critic, and eventual Minister of Culture André Malraux, refers to the mental operation of self-selecting a personal canon of works of art and the consequent ability to arrange, juxtapose, or exhibit them at will and according to one's (changing) proclivities or purposes; we can see, through the accumulation of visual references in this piazza scene, all arranged very deliberately by Argento visually to complement and accentuate the movement of his plot, how the city itself becomes an art gallery in which the placement of pieces facilitates, mirrors, or contrasts the movements of the spectator-character through that space. Fundamentally, what Argento does is concretely spatialize Malraux's (already metaphorically spatial) mental process.

the gallery, unable to access either. The hermetically sealed nature of his predicament is communicated aurally through Argento's eschewing of music and sound effects during this sequence. Sam cannot hear what is going on inside, and the woman cannot hear him as he tries to yell to her through the glass. This has the effect of shifting the film into a totally visual narrative mode during this pivotal scene, which will become important later on as Sam discovers that he cannot trust his initial reading of the attack.

One way in which to interpret the spatial dynamics of this scene is as an enactment of the constraints of communicability. Dalmas finds himself moving between a series of spaces that "communicate" onto one another—the street, the vestibule, and the gallery—and the connecting architecture is one that seeks through the large glass sliding doors to create visual continuity between three discrete spatial units, rendering them permeable to the gaze. Ultimately, their translucence is a deception, for they are the main obstacles to oral communication between these same spaces: the stabbed woman cannot hear Dalmas, nor can he hear her; eventually, a passerby on the street notices Sam trapped in the vestibule and has difficulty understanding his request that he go and call the police; when the police eventually arrive, they cannot figure out how to open the outer door and Dalmas slumps resignedly into a corner beneath a small, white-painted decorative tree, a final pictorial flourish through which Argento shores up his painting-like framing of the eyewitness to an attempted murder. Essentially, because of the duplicitous nature of the architecture, the occupants of the three communicating spaces have become nothing more to one another than silent, framed, *separate* images. The pictures of the killer's victim, the trapped eyewitness, and the tardy police are overlain in a collage that seems to convey a particular story about the attack—one that, in this case, turns out to be the wrong one.

When the moment is transformed into a 'framed' image, only an instant, rather than a sequence, is transmitted, the illusion of self-containment generated. Argento's *gialli* illustrate how that instant can be dangerously, erroneously extrapolated into a narrative. The protagonists find themselves stranded in their own eternal, agonizing present, in the frozen, bounded world of a painting, which in turn becomes the moment that haunts them for the rest of the film; the protagonist cannot be returned to "normal time" until the inherent fallacy of the instantly, visually-communicated information is recognized and a more complex narrative of the film's mystery emerges as the true one. Instead of employing them merely as eerie, pictorial backdrops for his murder scenes, Argento uses the presence of still human bodies trapped within images as a means of underscoring the major perceptual obstacle to the plot's resolution.

Gialli often count amongst their plot twists a revelation that the entire investigation following the witnessing of the crime is predicated on a fundamental misunderstanding of a clue. These clues are not simply red herrings or dead-end leads, but instead become fatally fixed images that fail to 'speak to' their detectives because of an unfortunate lack of context or of a separation of mutually dependent visual and aural referents. This separation of the image from its context is what results in Sam's misinterpretation of the woman as the victim and the man in the trenchcoat as the killer, an assumption upon which he bases the entirety of his detective work, when in reality, the exact opposite is true. He saw Monica Ranieri, the woman in white, attempting to murder her husband and *she* is responsible for the carnage that follows while he dutifully attempts to cover her bloody tracks. It would be easy to think of such twists simply as moments that attempt to pull the rug out from under savvy viewers aware they are watching a mystery. But the *giallo's* generic subversiveness and its obsessive interest in architecture and visual art indicate that it has more existential concerns. The *illusions* of communication, identity, meaning are created because these deadly scenes are viewed by the films' protagonists in ways they could not have been without being framed by such an architecture. But in truth this architecture intended to direct, focus, clarify our vision is a great inhibitor, fatefully reducing individuals to decontextualized and misleading images who *believe* they are communicating unimpeded with one another. In this light, the *gialli*, with their alienated protagonists who find themselves sole witnesses, stranded in strange cities, and unable, until the very end, to comprehend the troubling sights they have seen, provide a critique of the conditions of subjecthood in a postmodern urban space, where the appearance of transparency and the proliferation of visual information belie deeply carved chasms between individuals and an upsetting incapacity for the expression of personal experience. These postmodern image-structures can actually rend the connective tissues between the individual and the other, the surface and what lies beyond, to the point that the killer is misconstrued as a victim.

Likewise, throughout *Profondo rosso*, Marc has been tormented by the idea that there was something "important" about a strange picture he saw in Helga's apartment when he unsuccessfully attempted to prevent her murder. Shown briefly during that scene as Argento's camera pans the corridor, the painting in question appears as one among many that are all similar, depicting distorted, ghostly faces in odd groupings. Needled by the feeling that something is amiss, Marc returns to the scene of the crime to examine the painting one more time, but discovers that it is not a painting at all. In fact, it is a mirror situated in such a way that it reflects a painting hung across the hall from it, perfectly framed

in its mirror image. Then, when he looks at that facing painting, he notices that it does not match up with what he registered the last time he was in the apartment. Standing across from the mirror, positioning himself in front of the painting, he finally realizes that he has known the face of the killer all along. He glimpsed the pallid face of his friend Carlo's "eccentric" mother Martha when, after committing the murder, she positioned herself in the same way and stood perfectly still, unblinking, making herself into one of these painted faces. In this way, the climactic scene provides a neat formal parallel with the catalytic piazza scene, in which Marc appears frozen before the 'painted' *Nighthawks* backdrop. In the latter, the protagonist is limited to existing *outside* of the picture, and in the former, the antagonist steps right *into* the image, deploying the transgression of its framing as part of her camouflage. One of Argento's primary theses is that in this gallery of superposed surfaces, the truth lies somewhere *between* them, amongst strata of artifice.

The investigative viewpoint of Marc and Sam (and other protagonists of *gialli*) reproduces the analytical perspective of the text itself: our heroes find themselves caught like insects in these shiny surfaces, but they eventually see through them because, for the purposes of their narratives, they *have to*: the murderer, too, is only revealed between the images, and this is achieved through the integration of the viewer *into* the framed image or reflective surface. The obfuscating activity of this gallery city is mobilized by the killer and the cinematic mystery narrative in their service. Ultimately, however, it is the self-reflexive position of the protagonist who must see through the conditions of their space (and how they relate to and help create their epistemological and existential crises) that allows for the mystery's solution.

3 Victims, Killers, and the Shock of Vision

In the images that form important thematic and narrative sites, the subject is, more often than not, a woman. Baudelaire's passerby and her female form are used, in part, to evoke ideas of classical grace and beauty, but the association between the horror genre and the victimized or murdered woman is a long and well-established one: Edgar Allan Poe declares that "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (Poe 1846); Baudelaire himself often utilizes this 'topic,' as in the poem "Une martyre," an ekphrastic work that languorously elaborates a painting of the nude body of a beautiful woman reclined upon a bed, leading to the revelation that she has been decapitated and her head, "like a ranunculus" (Baudelaire 1857), sits on an end table, a morbid floral decoration. This is an affinity shared with Argento

and other directors of *gialli*, a genre that has been criticized for its misogyny and aestheticized depictions of the murders of beautiful women.

Glen S. Close's study *Female Corpses in Crime Fiction: A Transatlantic Perspective* offers a thorough exploration of the ubiquitous trope of the sexualized female cadaver in media, tracing a trajectory from Gothic fiction to hard-boiled detective novels to contemporary Hollywood TV series. Close discusses how "sensational male adventure fiction ... employed a 'voyeur style' of literary titillation, as it fixated on female breasts, misogynistic sex crimes, and female cadavers staged as spectacles for scopic consumption by desiring male subjects" (Close 2018, 86); this description is generally applicable to *giallo*⁶ (a cinematic genre which does spring from literary crime fiction), though in this respect some films are certainly more egregious than others in terms of their explicitness, the extent of their leering, and their sometimes bluntly reactionary politics. Argento certainly participates in this trope through the ways in which he films death scenes in the two films that are the focus of this chapter. In *L'Uccello*, two of the victims killed onscreen are women and two are men, but the former scenes are much more drawn out and one of them very sexualized, while the latter are more cursorily rendered. This interest in female victims aligns with what Close terms the "necropornographic fantasy in which the female cadaver functions as a perfectly inert and receptive object for the male gaze, male desire and male sexual aggression" (Close 2018, 226). Strangely, in other ways, Argento's work seems to push back against tendencies Close identifies in these texts. In *Profondo rosso*, we see three women and three men killed on screen; in this later film, the (considerable) level of violence is more consistent across genders. Another significant difference between *Profondo rosso* and *L'Uccello* is that while it is undeniably gorier, the blood that spatters the screen is so vividly red it resembles nothing so much as paint, and in this way, the death scenes themselves become yet more works of art in a film filled with pictures, frames, and images of all kinds. The deliberate stylization of violence certainly contributes to this broader tradition of the aestheticization of female corpses, but at the same time, the pronounced artifice of these scenes makes it harder to categorize them among the cadavers Close identifies as "very prominent emblems of the Real ... [the representation of which has] acquired extraordinary prominence in an era defined by the virtualization of cultural and social experience"

6 Close even references *giallo* in passing (citing Fulci, director of some of the more egregious cases, noting their "narrative formula (that of the serial killing of beautiful, sexually adventurous women)" and that they form an important connection between hard-boiled fiction and later American slasher films).

(Close 2018, 20). Because they look so different, because of the baroque nature and pointed artifice of their framing, it is hard to place Argento's death scenes alongside the efforts of a TV show like *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* or works focusing on snuff films (other examples Close examines) to depict incredibly detailed, lifelike cadavers offered up for autopsy and ostensibly forensic scrutiny. In fact, as I have attempted to show in this chapter's analysis of architectural frameworks and the omnipresence of images in Argento's depiction of urban spaces, it is precisely the odd, estranging, dangerous quality of this "era defined by the virtualization of cultural and social experience" that constitutes one of the director's most significant themes; while the murders in his films become derealized through his stylistic flourishes and are transformed into images, they also become part of a recursive series of the deceptive, decontextualized, or manipulated pictures that obfuscate the truth around which their mystery narratives are tangled. In this way, the fixation on these images evokes "the subject's struggle to assert its agency and substance against the negating void marked by the cadaver" (Close 2018, 15), while simultaneously suggesting that this "negating void" might, in fact, be more accurately located within the misleading, paradoxical profusion of ephemeral images that characterizes modern urban life; it remains nevertheless true that some of Argento's more philosophically fascinating suggestions (which do differentiate him from certain *giallo* directors clearly aiming for mere titillation) are offered through his mobilization of tropes of hard-boiled detective fiction and horror films and the narrative instrumentalization of female murder victims.

As Laura Mulvey puts it, "the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation"⁷ (Mulvey 1989, 19). This is something that Argento takes to an extreme in his films, where the contemplation is erotic and sadistic, voyeuristic and interpolating, and where the world literally comes to a halt around the hero during these moments in which he or she is looking at these normally female-gendered images of violence that are so clearly modeled on paintings, sculpture, or other works of visual art. Even if the women are not perfectly frozen in these scenes, they still are fixed in two ways: first, through their eventual death, or violent immobilization; and second, through their alignment with works of art in a variety of manners (via spatial juxtaposition with actual works of art [paintings in *Profondo rosso*, sculptures in *L'Uccello*] and through their portrait-like framing in windows and doorways). But while

7 Emphasis added.

these sequences spring from this precise impulse, they also are made to subvert it retroactively through processes of investigation: the women in these two films are in fact catalysts of the narrative, and while women more often than not fulfill the role of beautiful victim in *gialli*, there are notable exceptions which show women perpetrating violence, especially in the work of Argento who often writes female antagonists.

One could argue that the active dimension that Argento develops through certain of the women in his films is that of a female gaze specifically figured, through his cinematic framing and thematic associations, as *the image looking back*. That she looks back in the moment of violence (a moment that forms the image and at the same time sees the destruction of its subject) is upsetting, and results in the kind of voyeuristic complicity that Mulvey establishes between the male protagonist and the cinema-going audience. But the encounter of gazes in these *gialli* also constitutes in itself a kind of violent specular contact. The shock of clashing gazes, magnified across panes of glass, forms the underlying basis for the films themselves, in which a great deal of the violence that ensues, perpetrated by a female killer, also centers around images and scenarios of “watching.” Adam Knee likewise points out how “To the extent that Argento’s films consistently foreground ambiguities of gender and sexuality and repeatedly suggest the instability of power relations implied by acts of looking and perceiving, they force us to move toward the kinds of critical positions ... that question the rigidity of certain psychoanalytic schema and of certain assumptions about gendered binarisms in the horror film” (Knee 1996, 215).

“In contrast to woman as icon,” Mulvey says, “the active male figure ... demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror recognition, in which the alienated subject internalised his own representation of his imaginary existence. He is a figure in a landscape” (Mulvey 1989, 20). But Argento turns the diegetic space around on his male protagonists, making it unreal (as in the eerily enchanted piazza), unnavigable (as in the treacherous glass vestibule), unknowable, and perilous; the female killers, however, exhibit a mastery of space and an intuitive understanding of its aesthetically-warped contours. Martha in *Profondo rosso* grasps so thoroughly the optics of the apartment corridor lined in paintings and mirrors that she can effectively hide herself and her identity there for the duration of the movie, and Monica stages her final attack on Sam in the same gallery space where he witnessed the initial attack and even tries to crush him under one of its unsettling, jagged sculptures. Unlike Mulvey’s dynamic of recognition between the male viewing subject and the male movie character, facilitated by the camera’s male gaze, Argento seems at times more interested in effecting a kind of cinematic ‘disalienation’

on the part of his characters and viewers. The space in which his protagonist finds himself, during these uncanny moments, is one whose strangeness they are suddenly attuned to, populated by sculptural figures and stalked by a menace that comes from, and returns to, the malevolent world of images. Urban space seems infected by this discomfiting mode of seeing and being seen, thus the city is inextricably linked to the violence and terror for which it becomes a theatre. One of the main narrative conflicts in *gialli* is the protagonist coming to understand the extent to which the city consists in images *and* to interpret them correctly by properly understanding the clues around them. The implication in these striking scenes of horror in which the image enacts a retributive violence upon the occupants of an uncanny, museum-like space is that this is the result of a wider-ranging, more realistically grounded impulse, at the individual and social levels, to transform the world around us into a series of pictures. Since the real world is composed of living beings—moving, breathing, seeing—Argento's life-size, even hyperbolic pictures are an appropriate form for depicting this tension and the dangers of aestheticizing, selective modes of seeing. The shock of exchanged gazes between witness and victim in Argento's *gialli* is another way of translating the 'flash' of the passerby's glance in Baudelaire's poem, a visual representation of undeniable otherness that manages to pierce the formal structures that seek to suppress it.

Women, in cinema and in the wider world, are most often subjected to these perniciously aestheticizing mechanisms because the auteur and the camera (as an extension of his gaze) have so often been male. Mulvey points out that in narrative film, male filmmakers and characters attempt to deal with an anxiety induced by female figures with two different tactics: "voyeurism" and "fetishistic scopophilia" (Mulvey 1989, 21–22), both of which Argento employs.⁸ Watching a woman as she is violently murdered through windows and doorways is blatantly voyeuristic; their transformation into images, added to the galleries of their surrounding spaces, is also plainly fetishistic. It is worth noting that the professions of both films' female killers—a gallerist in *L'Uccello*, a former movie star in *Profondo rosso*—relate to image-making and cults of beauty, though Argento shies away from explicitly connecting these vocations with their psychological conditions and violent tendencies.

8 Mulvey states that voyeurism is a "preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluing, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the *film noir*)," whereas fetishistic scopophilia involves "the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star)."

Argento develops a fascination with eyes, which helps to shed light on his use of framed compositions, but also relates to his interest in, and subversion of, gender (“... the eye becomes thematically pivotal as an organ which is itself not intrinsically gendered, but which is at the center of sensory and erotic experience nevertheless” [Knee 1996, 219]). The juxtaposition of a mobile, terrified gaze and a petrified, stilled body is rather a common one in *gialli*, bringing together a stylized visualization of the films’ themes of looking and a narrative contrivance that establishes the nature of victimhood. Examples of this include: Bava’s *Sei donne per l’assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace*, 1964), whose stylish title sequence sees its cast of fashion-world characters (models and designers) positioned alongside faceless mannequins in immobile poses, a few of which are broken only by the sweep of a roving, incongruous gaze; Paolo Cavara’s *La tarantola dal ventre nero* (*The Black Belly of the Tarantula*, 1971), in which the poison of an exotic wasp is used to paralyze a killer’s victims to keep them alive as they are disemboweled, the camera focusing on their panicked stare; and Argento’s *Opera* (1987), in which the heroine is forced to look at shocking scenes of murder by a strip of needles taped below her eyelids, which prevents her from closing her eyes, and tied up so she is unable to turn away. The deployment of the subject, explicitly framed as an image, in Argento’s films is another example of this. The obvious temptation might be to think about the metacinematic implications of such compositions: they transform the movie screen into a mirror of its audience, the members of which likewise sit, immobilized in their seats and by their fascination, and made to look at the horrors of the proceedings before them. But the movies’ characters must not be neglected, either, for their always gendered nature relates more broadly to questions of artistic representation, agency, and subject-object dynamics. Even when men are contained in these frames, as in *L’Uccello*, their looking out implies a subject on the other side of the composition’s boundary, one who is female, who is (by all appearances) a victim, and who, most significantly, *looks back*. The voyeuristic impulse is troubled in such scenes, where the desire to look (in a manner clearly coded as plastic or cinematic in the *giallo*) is confronted with another gaze that denies such easy ‘pleasure’ and instead initiates processes of fear, discomfort, and empathy that inevitably take off into the films’ narrative trajectories. Put another way, these scenes align more closely with the impulse that Carol J. Clover identifies as one of the characteristics of the North American slasher film⁹—the potential for a male audience’s masochistic iden-

9 See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Clover, unfortunately, does not consider the *giallo* in her very influential study *Men, Women, and*

tification with a female victim. The protagonist (and the viewer) of the *giallo* finds himself surrounded by a space that has become surreal, whose senses of perspective and proportion are undergoing terrifying, kaleidoscopic slidings that cause them to doubt their easy conceptions of the world around them and others' experiences of that same world. The *giallo* considers the dangers of looking and while it does this frequently through an objectifying positioning of women within its frames, Argento ambiguates the image that this process ultimately creates: women are victims, *and* women are killers. This represents an extension of the dynamic that we have already seen at play in Baudelaire, in which the passerby is turned into a statue but at the same time is able to convulse the poet into uncontrollable positions with her gaze and to enact upon him a form of death. We look at images, but, as the writing scrawled on a mirror in a dark room of Argento's Profondo Rosso memorabilia store and museum in Rome warns, "*Le immagini ti guardano*"—"The images are looking at you."

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Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film, no doubt because of her interest in American productions, particularly, and because of the relative unavailability of *gialli* for home viewing at the time of its writing. They would, in fact, have served as excellent support for her thesis.

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Santushti and *Jodidar* through Serial Killing in *Raman Raghav 2.0*

Aratrika Das

Anurag Kashyap's film *Raman Raghav 2.0* (2016) opens up uncharted territory to understand the representation of serial killers in popular culture. Based on the story of the notorious serial killer Sindhi Dalwai of Mumbai, this film is about Ramanna's (a serial killer) relationship with a policeman called Raghavendra Singh Ubbi. During the trial, Dalwai confessed to killing 23 people in 1966 along the GIP (Great Indian Peninsular Railway as the Central Railway (India) was then known) line and almost a dozen in 1968 in the suburbs of Mumbai. In his confession though Dalwai did not provide any motive for the murders, and took the police on a city-wide tour to show the places where he had murdered and the rod with which he hit. In 2016 Anurag Kashyap and co-writer Vasan Bala recreate this specific moment towards the end of the film: Ramanna tells that he kills for "*santushti*!" (satisfaction); his successor will be Raghav, the investigating police officer; and that their "*mukhti*" (salvation) lies in continuing this work and not in a woman's love (*Raman Raghav 2.0*, 1.58 mins). Ramanna describes how he realised these truths—by watching Raghav kill. As a serial killer Ramanna watches another kill; relishes it, and eyes the latter as *jodidar* (partner).¹

"I know you more than you know yourself"—Ramanna tells Raghav in the police station. This pantomime of the slogans of self-actualization is a ruthlessly accurate *reductio ad absurdum*: how does one go about releasing one's true nature if one's true nature happens to be that of a killer? Ramanna does not try to curb his inborn violence to appear normal like the vigilante killer of the television series *Dexter*. He does not embody archetypal Gothic villainous characteristics like Hannibal Lecter. As the serial killer he is the main protagonist and audiences become direct witnesses of his thoughts and murders unmediated by an external agent that posits a moral frame to the serial killer's actions (Santaularia 2009: 157–178). The film deploys the tropes of psycho-horror—as well as of the other two subgenres that comprise serial killer fiction (the serial

¹ *Raman Raghav 2.0*, 2016. All translations used in this paper are mine.

killer thriller and the slasher)—and sums up a context in which the “convening of the public around scenes of violence ... has come to make up a wound culture: the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons” (Seltzer 1998: 1). Not all his victims are women, but he constructs an image of masculinity linked to the expression of violence. Consequently, he is embedded in a patriarchal ethos which favours the creation of “social contexts which positively evaluate aggression and competitiveness” (Brittan 1989: 83) and in which “males are trained for a world of independent aggressive action” (Lipman-Blumen 1984: 55) to the extent that, in Michael S. Kimmel’s words, “violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood” (2006: 278).

Even though, like in the serial killer thriller and the slasher films, Ramanna’s monstrosity is constructed by his violence and the atrocities he commits, this violence is presented as acceptable as it is also perpetrated by the police officer, Raghav. Both enjoy killing. Both hide in the shadows and kill at night mostly. And both seem to be unperturbed to canvass the audience’s approval. Ramanna rapes, then murders his sister, her husband and their child. Raghav engages in sexual relationships with women in the presence of his girlfriend and then kills her. In a context in which, in Pearce and Stacey’s words, “individuals are educated in the ‘narratives of romance’ from such an early age that there is little hope of immunity” (1995: 12), Ramanna has to resort to the language of romantic fiction to persuade Raghav to be his *jodidar*. And by deploying terms such as *jodidar*, the film both engages and dismantles romantic claims. It asserts the lack of singularity of the beloved and the uniqueness of the romantic relationship; yet the profound and lasting fulfilment of their connection can appear only in the lexicon of a romantic encounter—*jodidar*.

1 What is Ramanna’s *santushti*?

When Ramanna describes his joy on seeing Raghav kill, the camera zooms on Ramanna’s face so as to bring back the pleasure of seeing the dead; he smiles remembering how the bodies twitched while Raghav beat them to death. An early example of this appears in the beginning of the film: Ramanna kills a man, but before he can evacuate the house, Raghav enters. Raghav sees the dead body, steals drugs, and then batters another on his way out of the house. The spectator sees Raghav holding a torch. The bright light of the torch hides his face. The frame is overwhelmingly blank, and this blankness erases his specific details. Only his hand on the hammer is visible as blood oozes out of the man’s skull. Ramanna is shown hiding in the corner, watching Raghav commit

the murder. The camera lingers on Ramanna's face: there is joy on discovering another killer, finally finding another who kills without specifying any reason. He is smiling, seems affable, looks at the camera, drawing the audience in with the promise of an insider's look. Quick successive scenes of violence are framed within Ramanna's introspection, revealing that the film's interest lies in the character's response to events rather than to the events themselves. This visual style privileges the sensorial experience of watching the film instead of the logical sequence of cause and effect. The spectator is expected to participate in Ramanna's fantasy of a perfect murder that is untainted by motive or gain.

A motiveless crime or *acte gratuit*, as Lisa Downing discusses in *The Subject of Murder*, is a masculine fantasy that elevates the aesthetic above the ethical. When the camera lingers on Ramanna's joyous face, I believe, it frees him from moral responsibility and orchestrates a spectacle of the murdering subject. It is a visual relation to the world viewed unburdened of any moral responsibility. This overcoming of moral limitations is a kind of power—the power of 'omniscience' that is energised by his all-seeing position. And a part of seduction of the film lies in orchestrating this slippage from the claims of morality into a slow chaotic disorderliness of visibilising bodies being battered. Borrowing Downing's phrase, I think the film's repeated dwelling on Ramanna's *santushti* relocates him from a man with a murderous career into the 'subject of murder'. He becomes more than (just) an individual committing the act, but emblematic of all the institutions and interpretive frameworks that come together in identifying and defining the murder: law, psychiatry, penology, and ideas about gendered violence.

With Ramanna the story is deliberately ludicrous, baroque, a grimmer-than-Grimm fairytale. Nawazuddin Siddique puts on a wonderfully witty double performance, of Ramanna being a killer and of Ramanna pretending to be human, walking around the city at night looking for a *jodidar*. What matters in the film is not so much what happens, but rather a certain tone, chilly and mocking, a sociopath's vision of ordinary life, often heard as a voiceover using Ramanna's interior commentary on the world and the people around him. That tone is never sad. Instead is always accompanied by an unnerving laughter—Ramanna's sense of satiation in seeing bodies being battered. He derives pleasure by watching another kill—seeing as a verb—and this pleasure is compulsive and Ramanna is driven to repeat it. Mimesis/secondary identification is produced through reaction shots, which 'suture' the spectator into the diegetic world, as film theorists argue, in this case via our identification with Ramanna's need to relentlessly see another kill.

In one scene, Ramanna sees Raghav forcefully penetrating a woman. This is followed by an argument with his girlfriend and Raghav smashes her head.

“Arrey waah! Killed his own girlfriend!” muses Ramanna.² The scene is distressing and dark: a “healthy” voyeur would revel at sex, while a sociopath only pretends to do such things in order to appear normal. Ramanna is not a voyeur because, as Laura Mulvey discusses in the context of sadism, a voyeur demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in linear time with a beginning and an end.³ Ramanna’s *santushti* lies in watching another batter victims. One posture repeatedly used in the film is his fingers circle round his eyes, almost like a binocular. He stares while Raghav hits at the writhing and struggling bodies. When Raghav kills his girlfriend, Ramanna smokes and looks intently at Raghav and not at the female body, even though her clothes are lifted away and much of her body lay visible. These two elements, the lack of interest in the female body and the intense gaze on Raghav, are related, and move away from Mulvey’s idea of the scopophilia—the pleasure in looking at other people’s bodies as objects.

Ramanna’s *santushti* is carefully constructed joy and satisfaction that effaces the distance between the criminal and the spectator: like the camera, Ramanna too derives pleasure looking at another. The spectator who repeatedly returns to watch serial killing, almost like Ramanna, solicits, calls into being, and is lured into an inexorable need to see another kill. Thus the spectator is made to uncomfortably sit within the boundaries of the film, permanently straddling between the two killers, negotiating the gaze and the narrating voices. If killing here are performative acts, reliant on the gaze of another killer, how do we understand their empathetic spectatorship? A serial-killer derives pleasure by *seeing* another kill—as a voyeur, as a paternal figure waiting to bestow the craftsmanship of murder to another, as a companion who seeks salvation in killing. If the relationship of two serial killers opens up affective, aesthetic, and conceptual possibilities—how do we understand this kind of desire that relies on a slow explosion of (in)coherence?

2 Ramanna and Raghav as *jodidar*

The film rejects conventional dualisms which define serial killers as having radical alterity to human beings; there is almost no moral difference between the

2 “Oh goodness!” (Translation mine).

3 Mulvey distinguishes two kinds of scopophilia: the first she calls “fetishistic scopophilia” and the second “voyeurism,” with the second kind associated with sadism. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington, 1989) 14–26.

murderer and the police officer. The film's use of the term '*jodidar*' cleverly dismantles what is seen as romantic love and draws attention to what Mark Seltzer calls our "wound culture". The wound culture embedded with a sense of alienation and isolation, promises a curative in the form of romantic love. Romantic love, popular culture teaches us, has a remedial value and can heal shattered sense of individual selfhood. This film takes this idea to its extreme. There is an overwhelming presence of evil, of fiendish violence, of insanity, of roving bloodlust, of chaos. That reveals an overwhelming absence—of good, of God, of reason, of calm, of order. And it is in a world where human individuality is grotesquely distorted by the infamous, single-minded killers and by the horribly dissected decomposing bodies of the victims. The serial killers lack any sense of coherent selfhood. They are drawn towards their victims randomly and there is no uniqueness in how and whom they decide to mutilate and batter. Their violence brings them no lasting fulfilment, and the pleasure found in the moment of torment must be repeated again and again. Nothing gives them everlasting pleasure. Their visual pleasure is not just pleasurable, but an experience of watching. And the look is not just a physiological experience of the eye.

It is to occupy, as Jonathan Crary's argues in *Techniques of the Observer*, a subject-position of an observer. In Joan Copjec's critique of Crary, she points out that in the optical experiments whose rise in the nineteenth century Crary narrates—the experiments that signalled the transition from an "abstract" (Cartesian) to a "corporealized" observer—"all indications are that the human eye that was the object of its study might just as well have been the eye of an ox—in other words, (merely) a physiological organ (Copjec 182)." But as Sartre explains in *L'être et le néant*, the human 'look' is not what takes place, as a merely physiological process, in the organ of the eye. Thus Crary's argument of the camera *obscura* model of vision fails to account for the survival of a look that would be anything other than a physiological process, a look that would be driven by a "passion for perceiving". In this case, Ramanna is a viewing subject situated at the center of the cinematic world that renders itself up as knowledge and as spectacle. Following Mulvey, his voyeurism is epistemological and possessive—it wants to know and to possess. Herein comes his need for a *jodidar*.

No amount of re-dramatizing the act of suffering gives them satiation. Theirs' is an endlessly re-forming voids of desire. The 'serial' aspect of serial murder rests, therefore, on compulsion and repetition, a dynamic which has always "both driven and been a manifestation of" the serial killer text (Clover 1992: 212). This dynamic of perpetual appetite and temporary satiation is endlessly reiterative: just as the lover cannot be content with a single erotic encounter, so the killer must murder, literally, serially.

The impermanence of satiation finds its corollary in the film's representation and repetition. There is a quickness and near-nothingness to their murders. Both Ramanna and Raghav have a god-like ability to see and can enjoy the pleasures of life at the expense of their victims who are disposable useless objects. While the dead bodies of his sister, her husband and their child decompose and putrefy, Ramanna can cook and eat chicken curry. Likewise, while other police officers hold their noses tightly because of the odour of the decomposing bodies, Raghav can walk into their kitchen, smell their dead bodies, use a plate from their kitchen and sniff on his drugs. In another instance, when police questions Ramanna, his response is not a sense of humility or remorse but of license, a conviction that he has received permission to do what he wants to. He requests for cigarettes because he sees himself as determining the fate of those around him. The poster of the film makes these connections explicit. Raghav's sunglasses and Ramanna's fingers round his eyes—alerts the readers to the film's preoccupation with watching dead bodies, seeing murders. Their faces, in the poster and in moments of murder, seem to suggest that they kill out of self-expression, in a grotesque mimicry of the filmmaker, out of an impulse to satiate a need for something.

This sense of satisfaction arising out of seeing dead bodies—Ramanna's *santushti* embodied as a joyous face—returns in the concluding scene of the film when Raghav smiles and batters a woman to death. Ramanna's search of a *jodidar* and Raghav's transformation into a figure of disgust, almost as a mirror-image of Ramanna, are then part of the seduction this film offers the spectator. It generates an ambiguous desire in which the serial killer eroticises the process of killing rather than hiding or justifying the murder with representations that intensify the serial-killer's longstanding concern with intersections of desire and violence. Contemporary Hindi films on serial-killers have generally raised questions about the nature of the human subject, through the abhuman and abject transgressions of the murderer.⁴

By situating Ramanna as the eye through which the spectator sees most of the events, the film inserts the trope of unreliability, puts in a self-conscious focus on textuality and our complicity with it. Further, it complicates that complicity with questions about the reality of what we witness. The scenes of violence are so extreme that they take on the quality of animation, and increasingly raise questions about their own reality. Such scenes are replayed to the

4 Kelly Hurley in *The Gothic Body* discusses the idea of an "abhuman," that "not-quite-human subject" moving away from human selfhood toward otherness (3–4). The abhuman "may be a body that retains traces of human identity has become [...] something quite different".

degree that they might be read as obsessive fantasies of Ramanna, or drug-induced hallucinations of Raghav. The ambiguity makes it almost impossible to distinguish between the credible and the hallucinogenic or fantastical. The confession-scene exemplifies this. Ramanna walks into the police station to tell them about the murders while Raghav convinces other police officers that Ramanna is a liar. Raghav is uncertain if this person knows about his own killings and Ramanna doubts if he can lure a potential accomplice. The viewer already knows all of this but can the viewer determine its limits? Each person invalidates the other's testimony. Both have a sense of destructive appetite, display signs of voyeurism, spectacle and desires that border on annihilation.

Both men are also aware of how society—through the prism of popular images, media portrayal, and socio-criminological study—will narrowly view them as murderously monstrous males. And so these serial killers eerily reflect back on the spectator expectations of their genre. These two introspective portraits turn back on us, here in the real world, to pose self-reflective questions about how and why we search for the meaning of male violence. Through their monologues and at times silences these two men speculate on how the audience's growing interest in serial killers arises from the conventional interpretation of violent male crime in the media and in scholarship. Following Carol Clover (1992) who analyze films as producing, "powerful images for identification and pleasure" (23) it is possible to say that these two serial killers, while superficially fitting into a genre that encourages a pleasurable search for meaning and an antipathy to the killer—what Suzanne Hatty calls that "monstrous Other mutation of the boundary-dissolving postmodern Self" (2000: 25)—radically demystify the genre as they question that search and its pleasure.

One scene in particular is when Ramanna walks the streets of Mumbai and there is almost a play on the mimetic and the representational: a neutral "camera eye" narrative voice dispassionately describes the crowds, the edify of Ravana being burnt, the procession of self-flagellating Muslim devotees, the slums with restless and sleepless families; only this time, Ramanna sees these as his potential victims. This scene defies a spectator's expectations of law and order's hunt for the killer, of a clear pattern to the killings, of cat-and-mouse games with the killer, and of an exploitative, gory reimagining of murders. There is no sense of resolution. Order might have been restored had Ramanna been killed; or if the madness of the killings explained by the reason of police procedures and forensic science. In this scene, with its crowd, narrow streets, claustrophobic houses, there is a postmodern senses of paranoia and replication—the killer could be almost any man, the victim could be anyone.

Spectators scramble for meaning, hoping to solve Ramanna, and expect, based on typical serial-killer movies, Raghav can apprehend him. Spectators want to see him apprehended. This tantalizing possibility that he will be caught is dangled before us, only to be plucked away. We realize that capture is impossible. The object of our attention and subject of our gaze, though, drifts away from us, and Ramanna, moving ever on, slips away into the darkness and Raghav takes his place. This violent collision of desire and disgust that both arises from and is promised antidote for spiritual, social, and cultural enervation comes in the form of exaggerated, parodic, and finally unsatisfying version of the heightened lyricism of the romantic encounter. This grimly parodies the conventional romantic ideal of two souls merging into one.

Seeing each other as a *jodidar* however is not a stand-in for romantic love. Though desiring for a companion, Ramanna does not see Raghav as a unique identity. This is radically different from the popular convention that, in the romantic relationship, the lover's individuality is uniquely recognized and treasured. Here Ramanna sees Raghav murder like him. His appetite and satiation through mutilation are similar to that of Raghav's. Because Ramanna does not have any sense of a coherent selfhood, he annihilates even the consolation of physical and psychic distinctions, creating instead strange syntheses and painful fusions with Raghav. Raghav is both repelled and feels a pull towards the empty and arid world of Ramanna. Ramanna seems to imply that you need to know if a person can hurt you or not, so is it possible that he is enacting a kind of ruthless Social Darwinism, killing others before they can hurt him? Or is he seeking some kind of deeper physical communion, as he 'gifts' Raghav the hammer with which he battered a man in the opening scene?

Raghav's virility twisted into rape, physical strength mutated into brutal force, and repression exploded into raging violence appears as a pursuit of nothing, not for meaning and not for happiness. He is killing not to understand himself, not to create a meaning for his life. Even with his girlfriend, Raghav finds in himself a lack of capacity for kindness. He is a human minus that certain something—soul/ heart—that separates us not from the animals but from machines, and portrays what Freud called "the psychopathology of everyday life." In Freud's "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" he distinguishes scopophilia from the component drive he calls in that text the "instinct for mastery," which will eventually inform a sadistic disposition. The latter is characterized by a pleasure in controlling the physical world—whereas the voyeur, unseen, is non-interventionist—and by "the absence of the barrier of pity" (193). Ramanna's identification with the camera's look and Raghav's repetition of Ramanna's subject-position marries this Freudian idea of scopophilia with voyeurism—in its insatiability, its endlessness, and its essential perverseness.

If Ramanna is a voyeur who is watching a film within the film, uncaring about the suffering he causes; Raghav kills and continues to kill without any moment of reflection. The ending shot with Raghav battering a woman inside her own house is the most mundane appearance imaginable for a serial killer yet also foreshadows a killer's "attempt at self-production and individualization in a de-individualized world" (Jorg Waltje, 2005: 117). Raghav's mimicry and masquerade of Ramanna's masculinity at the end makes him empty, almost blank, that is, a mirror reflecting nothing back. He is stuck in a kind of self-blanking loop. At that exact moment, the camera stands outside the door: Raghav holds a wooden stick and as he is about to hit a woman, he closes the door. In this moment, the camera is extending Seltzer's argument about, "the profile of the killer emerging from the scene of the crime, the merging of the killer back into context or locale" involving a "failure of distinction between subject and space" that is "experienced at once as the lure of anonymity ... and as the threat of anonymity."

Raghav as a serial killer and the screen (onto which an image can be replayed and thus serially reproduced) merge into a killing-space here. Borrowing Seltzer's term, I think Ramanna is inseparable from his "spectacular violence" (54), a "violence inseparable from its reproduction as spectacle" (Seltzer 186). The screen becomes the scene of the crime, but can it fully contain what we witness? No. With the relentless and endless production of onscreen serial killers, the screen is tantalising the viewer. The viewer is now waiting to hear another *thud thud* and waiting to see blood spill forth. The *jodidar* is complete.

3 Is the Spectator a *jodidar* Too?

In this film, the oppositional binaries in the realm of spectatorship are radically abolished. The usual process of *illusionistic identification* on the part of the spectator is turned on its head by portraying the serial-killer almost as an amateur filmmaker. Ramanna watches Raghav from the rooftop, high in the frame, creating a sense of dominance. Ramanna waits for Raghav to kill, ponders over how and when Raghav might kill, and then continues his own killings without any remorse or explanation. I am interested to understand these relations of gaze that the film poses to a spectator through a serial killer consuming vicariously another killer. Raghav is unsure on how to perceive Ramanna: as a murderer, he is a monster, but he is the only one who sees Raghav as he is. However, Raghav is not a stand-in for the audience watching the film. He represents a very particular kind of person; he is a murderer, one who kills without qualms.

Also, both Ramanna and Raghav draw considerable pleasure out of their killing. Since both Ramanna and Raghav kill and will continue to kill, the ending is both disturbing and satisfying. The film asks its audience to be critical of what they are consuming, just as one should question a meal served to them by Hannibal Lecter.⁵ These ambiguities posit a potentially problematic analogy between, “acts of killing and an addiction to representations: that is, something like an equation between acts of violence and the relative passivity of ‘just looking’” (Seltzer 65). The film chronicles brutal murders from the perspectives of the killers and, in disquieting detail, anatomize the feelings of pleasure, erotic power, and, perhaps most unsettlingly, a peculiar sense of *santushti* that accompany each attack. Ramanna and Raghav both exemplify, “the kind of sexuality that can only take pleasure in destruction—the sexuality of the serial killer” (Seltzer 120).

As the audience keeps clamouring greedily to see it all, the camera eyes advance with dramatic hesitation. The staged caution is to let viewers know that this is dangerous ground. What we would see would leave an indelible mark—the risk would be to feel “trapped within another’s mad malevolent dream,” as Joyce Carol Oates noted. Oates warned, “to live in a narrowly bounded area in which a ‘serial killer’ is operating, with seeming impunity” is “an experience virtually impossible to explain, or to forget” (1994: 52). Because this film offers no psychoanalytical explanation, rooted in childhood, for their killers’ act and denies any overarching meaning or message, the viewer is kept at an uneasy near-distance, watching, waiting, and observing at little, trying to decode their actions or apprehend a pattern. In the end, the camera stops moving, leaving us behind. Ramanna’s serial-killing remains a ceaseless search, a desire to establish his presence in the world through the absencing of others.

The only reason—in a mirror-image of why we viewers want to solve a crime and search for its meaning—he continues to kill and to search for meaning is his search for *jodidar*. His desire is a kind of non-desire, that is, to not have a romantic companion. He anticipates finality by imagining his arrest in his conversations with the policemen, and therefore wants the senseless brutal killings to continue through his *jodidar*. ‘Normal’ desire—romantic companionship between two consenting people—is eerily far from him, as he wanders the streets, stares at the crowd, runs along the rooftops in the slum, walks into unsuspecting people in the shopping-malls or sees people from the rooftop at night. At these moments, it is as if ‘normal’ desire is itself drifting away from

5 Hannibal Lecter is a fictional character created by Thomas Harris. Lecter is a forensic psychiatrist who eats his victims after murdering them.

him, who becomes a paralyzed, mechanical figure. He turns his detachment into a desire for another serial killer—an emptied-out, dismembered desire. This empty desire, what I have called *santushti*, can only appear as a smile while seeing another kill, and has to be reiterated by killing and seeing that killing.

Desire and violence shares a representational lexicon, with the same sense of urgency that pushes appetite towards satiation. This satiation often brings with its gratification, as William Ian Miller notes, a “sickness of surfeit” (110). Thus, “disgust has a kind of inevitable connection with the satisfaction of desire” (110–111). For Miller, the central paradox of disgust is its “allure”, its ability to simultaneously repel and attract (Date 108). Pierre Bourdieu calls disgust “the paradoxical experience of enjoyment extorted by violence” (Date 488) and, in language marrying dread and desire, describes the “ambivalent experience” of this enjoyment as “the horrible seduction”.

In *Raman Raghav 2.0* linkage of loss to love, sex to violence, appetite to surfeit, and desire to death, popular understandings of a serial-killer are unhelpful. Through violence and dismemberment with no recognisable justification, Ramanna speaks with consciousness but without self-awareness, narrating events without any moment of introspection. But does this lack of self-awareness is not *mens rea* or a guilty mind. This narration, like the graphic violence it shows, creates crises of representation, the “extremes of representation” that “question the very possibility of creating literature in a world where representations are irreconcilable with their referents” (Taylor 2006:176). Within such a world, Ramanna’s desires remain monstrously un-accountable.

Furthering this representational ambiguity is the level of coincidence, happenstance, and human intercession that support the killers’ violence. Ramanna hides in the dark corners, sees Raghav every night, and hears what people say about him because nobody notices his proximity: he merges with the darkness. Raghav almost regularly kills and then visits those same sites later as a police officer and nobody seems to notice this. Both the killers seem to be immune to forces of law and evade the hunt of a classic murder mystery tale. There is no detective’s path of clue and chase in this film. There is no significant detecting presence working toward resolution. Instead, crimes remain mysteries.⁶ Though the viewers know the killers, their motivation is never revealed. The killers remain killers and there is no sense of pursuit.

6 Mysteries, as opposed to crime fiction, is often used to describe Victorian literary texts such as *Mysteries of London*, *Mysteries of Paris*. Anurag Kashyap’s urban noir can be seen as a post-colonial reworking of these old Victorian tropes of criminal monstrosity and desire.

Their mobility suggests that they are free not just in terms of legality, but also ontologically. They are not bound along any dictum of what it means to be a human. They can constantly vacillate between human and monster, or spectator and agent of violence. Elana Gomel's book *Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject* sees such subjects as 'violent sublime,' a term she defines as "the unrepresentable that clamors for representation ... that which exceeds language but provokes speech" (xxviii). Gomel argues that a killer experiences an ellipsis, a gap, at the site of motive—he cannot say why he commits violence. And he experiences this ellipsis before the body of the victim, "eliminating not only graphic descriptions of violence but desire, contingency, and accident" (xliv).

The film situates the viewer within its relations of power and desire through the wielding of the gaze. I suggest the film deliberately invokes its own dynamic of dubiety, troubling fact/fiction distinctions on multiple fronts by repeatedly referencing true-crime scenes, creating a claustrophobic control of the narrative through Ramanna's focalizations, and by diligently dilating upon issues of reality and representation. Just as true-crime narratives provide a, "privileged interface for 'true' horror and fictional art-horror" (Matt Hills 2005: 137), so fictional texts on serial killers may thwart assumptions, "that we can draw a clear distinction between artistic imitation and reality" (Cynthia Freeland 1995: 133). Ramanna sits on the dark rooftops and mediates a relation to the world that is, in Jean Louis Baudry's terms, "transcendental," freed from the empirical constraints to which it is bound in the natural world. This liberating vision, of an all-seeing, unseen subject-position corresponds to the position of the camera. The process of identification with the transcendental position of the look in turn sustains Ramanna's, as the seeing-subject's, an "illusion of voyeuristic separation" from the world onto which he has visual access, as Laura Mulvey put it, notably inserting gendered pronouns into the account (9). Stanley Cavell, in *The World Viewed* (1971), describes this non-reciprocity as part of the "ontology" of the cinematic medium; for its part, the "ontological status" of the cinema spectator, is "invisibility" (45).

Movies reproduce the world magically, writes Cavell, "[n]ot by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen" (40). Cavell calls this "displacement": watching a film, "we are displaced from our natural habitation within [the world which is at once distancing from that world and an "overcoming of] our fixed distance" (41). The screen ruptures the "natural" chasm between seeing and seen, the reversibility that constitutes what Merleau-Ponty in his work calls the "flesh" of the world. The cinema spectator is displaced from that world: he is never visible, not being-seen, but can only see. Though still located inside a corporeal frame, for a brief moment, the spectator

becomes a pure vision. A subject of non-reversible look. Ramanna occupies precisely this position of the spectator.

Raman Raghav 2.0 self-consciously purports to be mimetic in its representations even while undermining its own mimetic integrity. Most of the narration takes in the form of Ramanna's confession or extended internal monologue, which simultaneously lends an eyewitness credibility while confining readers within a disturbed subjectivity that is, by virtue its own narrative, fundamentally unreliable. Elana Gomel in her book *Bloodscripts* discusses how the serial killer constructs discourses of authenticity through confession and by conflating his/her abhuman subjectivity with the human subjectivity of the eyewitness. Gomel defines this as a 'bloodscript.' Raghav's acts of murder are witnessed by Ramanna who then makes those as part of his own—this spiralling lends a provocative intimate absence of mediation and the corresponding impossibility of creating an unmediated text for the viewer. The serial killer, "belongs to the realms both reality and fiction" (Allue 2002: 22).

The serial killer can "readily travel between fact and fiction" (Hills 137). This cultural mobility is a key of what animates the film here. Ramanna as a homeless serial-killer on the streets of Mumbai is, however, an unlikely subject of Western metaphysics. His violence and need to watch dead bodies repeatedly makes the spectator recognise the ways in which the image never satisfies in lasting ways, but must always be returned to and re-created in serial-killer films; that is, it must be serialized. As a serial killer, Ramanna is thus "the species of person proper to a mass-mediated public culture: the mass in person". (Seltzer 7) His is, what Hatty calls a "kind of circular process of incorporation and imitation, a mimetics of desire and violence" (2000: 200). Ramanna's voyeurism is distinguished in the Freudian schema precisely as a mode of relating to an object predicated on distance: it does not reach the object, which retains its separateness and thus its autonomy; voyeurism is not driven by a desire to 'have' the object; on the contrary, like the lens of the camera, Ramanna's desire is watch from a distance. His voyeurism is also not epistemophilia—he does not have any desire to know or understand his inclination to kill.

There is never any attempt to translate his visual experience into conceptual knowledge about serial-killing in the film. Rather the spectator sees only his eyes, a rapt gazing that lingers on the surface of things. His *santushti* or satisfaction stems from perceiving, and draws no instrumental purpose. Mulvey's critique of voyeurism was predicated on her assumption about its sexism: the polarized, asymmetrical structure of the look corresponds to the polarity between the man who looks and the woman who is looked at. Ramanna does not follow this formula. He watches Raghav only because he kills. So to-be-looked-at is to occupy a space of serial killing, a shared condition of the

beings that populate his world. This is not to say that Ramanna's gaze is somehow indifferent to sexual difference; he unleashes violence on women. But Ramanna's gaze, his search for a *jodidar*, his *santushti* on finding one, is indifferent to what a male gaze is supposed to do—re-enact a heterosexual maleness.

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CONCLUSION

Healing through Horror in a Pandemic: The Editors in Dialogue

Anhiti Patnaik and Elana Gornel

EG: This volume of essays on serial killing and serial spectatorship developed both in spite of and because of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the second lockdown in the United States, brought on by a fresh wave of the coronavirus in December 2020, I noticed that I could no longer listen to my usual scientific or political podcasts. Because of the pressure of the pandemic, I realised that the only podcasts that gave me any comfort were true crime. In other words, to forget about the daily toll of mortality, I would listen to lurid descriptions of murder. This is the real paradox of violence and the way we consume violence or relate to representations of crime across media. Even as our own lives turned into a medical dystopia to rival speculative fiction, narratives of true crime, serial killers, and gruesome murders exploded in popularity. They became the bread and butter of global broadcasting networks and true crime narratives of serial killers topped the charts on Spotify, Audible, Netflix, and other platforms.

AP: The pandemic certainly added a 'glocal' dimension to this paradox of violence you identify. We may now be in a position to expand the Anglo-centric metrics that have been used thus far to study its impact on global popular culture. Why are serial killer narratives, with their exaggerated taste for violence, so appealing in times of personal and public crisis? Let's examine how the pandemic impacted ordinary lives, desensitized ordinary people to death and inequality. Lockdowns imposed by governments across the world in response to the spread of the coronavirus saw a rise in reported statistics of domestic abuse and intimate-partner violence. Trapped in their homes then perhaps, these serial killer narratives and true crime podcasts may have functioned as a survival guide for a predominantly female audience. After all, much of these narratives are about a psychopathic killer who is exceedingly ordinary, banal, *like us*. So, it's not as if our increased interest in the minds of serial killers during lockdown was purely aesthetic. Fantasy has a way of influencing real-life decisions one may need to make to survive situations of domestic violence. I'd like

to think that perhaps the phantasmagoria of serial killing found a way to bleed into the phantasmagoria of lockdown-related deaths. In a hitherto unprecedented way, 'Life' began to imitate 'Art.'

EG: Indeed, it points to a more fundamental question about gender and representationality. Why are we paradoxically attracted to and repelled by representations of violence? Especially in times of crisis? Especially as *women*, or in minority cultures? What are the universalist assumptions about gender and aesthetic consumption with respect to the gratuitous nature of serial killer narratives? This cultural and cognitive mapping of violence is important for the critical work we are trying to do in this volume. Interestingly, the major consumers of these true crime podcasts were young women, or those most likely to be victims of serial killing and domestic violence in global statistics.

AP: We are yet to see robust research dealing with the pandemic's relation to global the popularity of serial killer narratives. This is something we were unable to adequately deal with in this volume, given as it was being compiled in the heat of the crisis. However, gender is a theoretical lens we have employed to a certain extent. And of course, the lens of gender intersects with our transnational framework. It is fascinating to see for instance, how Laura Mulvey's theories of "voyeurism" and "scopophilia" feature in such diverse chapters, from Das's analysis of Bollywood crime noir to Khilnani's work on the *femme fatale* in Japanese shojo manga, and Pourmikhail's piece on Bong Joon Ho's iconic film *Memories of Murder*. Mulvey, like most cultural theorists, delves deep into the particular example of the misogynistic gaze in Hollywood, but her term "scopophilia" allows one to expand beyond the borders of American popular culture.

EG: Yes, work like Mulvey's is important because it dives into the psychology of the consumer from a gendered perspective, that one could consider to be fairly 'universal.' It may help us understand the precise discursive ways in which the rituals of a white male American serial killer are mapped and re-mapped in global true crime narratives, often by pushing beyond the stereotype.

AP: To that end, I was reading Laura Browder's seminal piece on women and true crime in contemporary America. The statistics of female readership that she uncovers—although they preceded the Covid-19 pandemic—

reveal a staggering level of engagement with graphic representations of violence, especially where the murder victim was a woman. Browder, of course, sees this as being no different from the self-help genre of non-fiction. According to her, these female readers use true crime books as a “secret map of the world”—a world where the serial killer’s motives and the victim’s survival depend on the vagaries of a culture of white toxic masculinity.

EG: While much of the extant scholarship on this serial consumption of true crime is Anglocentric, our volume examines the emergent category of a ‘glocal’ serial killer narrative that traverses global broadcasting platforms. In fact, the main feature that distinguishes our volume from competing works on violence and spectatorship is its transnational and transmedial scope. Instead of studying narratives of violence emerging from a particular culture or media, especially from the Anglocentric mainstream, our contributors deal with diverse cultures and platforms. We even had to resist categorizing these chapters under the relatively safe cultural binary of ‘Global North’ versus ‘South.’ Instead, the problem of spectatorship becomes the axis around which the volume is organized.

AP: Still, I appreciate Browder’s nuanced use of the term “secret map of the world” (2006). It’s almost as if from her observations on the propensities of American middle class female consumers of crime fiction, we may project towards a ‘universal’ category of the reader. Igl’s chapter on the emotional “entanglement” of consumers of female-centric serial killer narratives in the West—be it a readers, viewers, or listeners—is important in this regard as it draws from theories of neuroscience and affect theory. Yes, her case studies are Anglocentric, but the way in which she explores the reader’s affective investment in narratives of violence may be applied to cultures across the globe. This is not to shore up a homogenous category of the “entangled” spectator, but to allow for some critical comparative work to take place on spectatorship and reception in crime studies.

EG: We have to be careful, though, to consider the multiplicity and heterogeneity of subject positions within the triad of perpetrator-victim-spectator in narratives of crime. A woman in an abusive domestic relationship consumes domestic thrillers differently from a single female executive bingeing Netflix documentaries. A teenager in Japan where mass school shootings are rare, views *Battle Royale* and its endless permutations in

anime and manga from a different perspective than their American counterpart. Moreover, as serial narratives of violence become global, crossing national and linguistic boundaries, the issue of translatability must be addressed. The popularity of 'exotic' crime fiction in the Anglo-American world raises the possibility that violence becomes an entry point into an unfamiliar culture, risking appropriation, and trivialization. In my chapter on Nordic noir, I address this possibility but the same may be true with regard to the popularity of Japanese and South Korean serial-killer movies and television shows. In being 'absorbed' into American visual culture, these movies and shows become fantastic travelogs rather than representations of their social and cultural reality of violence. This process is gaining speed as more and more countries, including Italy, Spain, India, China, and Thailand, are becoming exporters of fictional violence. This is why the cross-cultural and transnational focus of our volume is so important.

- AP: In defining serial killing and seriality itself as a symptom of a burgeoning postmodern and postcolonial global culture, I think it is worth raising some further questions that are addressed in our volume. Why does this kind of violence resonate in so many different cultural settings? Are there specific national forms of serial killing and its representation? How can postcolonial theory (or the lack of) contribute to our understanding of serial killers? We cannot address these questions simply by creating an aggregate of different cultural constructions of the serial killer. Nor can we rely just on Eurocentric models of the murderous sublime that continues to dominate much of the critical discourse on serial killing. Instead, we call for a rigorous theorization of spectatorship, since much of the paradox of violence depends not on how the act is committed or represented but why it is pleurably consumed.
- EG: This reminds me of Michel Foucault's brilliant work in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) on the scaffolds of the convicted killers of medieval France. The way the onlookers reacted to the murderer's pamphlets show us how we have stopped gazing at the pathological individual and begun gazing at ourselves. We have come to occupy the 'scaffold' through our social media avatars and ritual performances of normality and abnormality. This was particularly visible during the pandemic. In my own persistent attachment to narratives of violence, I wondered was I doing something unethical by listening to true-crime podcasts during the pandemic? What about hundreds of millions of readers, Netflix watchers and video gamers

who make true crime and serial killing a billion-dollar industry? Are they complicit? And perhaps even more troubling: does this consumption of fictional violence obscure the actual violence happening in the world?

AP: Through these critical questions, we evolved the theory of a persistent witness in this volume that manifests in what we call *serial spectatorship*. A serial spectator is one who—much like a serial killer persists on killing—persists on consuming narratives of murder. The serial spectator paradoxically derives pleasure from violence but remains ethically unwilling to identify with the drives of the serial killer. While this definition is something each contributor grapples with and even contests in varying degrees, there is a core alignment around the serial spectator's fascination and repetition compulsion. Whether they obsessively linger on the crime scenes of the Italian *giallos* like fascinated Baudelairean flaneurs, or flatly exit the theatre as the audience of Lars Von Trier's film *The House that Jack Built*, the chapters by Vorissis, and Cabral and Sasse respectively address the same problem of persistent witnessing in narratives of serial violence.

EG: One can argue that the comfort of violent representation lies precisely in the chasm between the chaos of our daily lives and the structured narrative form of novels, movies, and even games. Even binging on true-crime podcasts, I know that the horror of murder has been tamed through narrativization: the orderly storytelling that obeys its own internal rules. True-crime stories are *stories*, as much as any Agatha Christie whodunit. However, there is a danger in making these distinctions too absolute. Some serial killers have been influenced by true crime or even crime fiction. We can argue endlessly about nature and nurture, but there is a nagging suspicion that by consuming violent narratives we are somehow complicit in the violence perpetrated across the globe. I, personally, do not think so, but I understand the contrary point of view. This is why the issue of complicity and ethical witnessing is such an important component in this volume.

AP: I'm going to be the devil's advocate here and ask is there a moral difference between the serial killer and the serial spectator? If the serial killer is defined by his/her persistence to commit ritualistic acts of violence, mainly due to a lack of empathy, then do we also lack empathy when we experience pleasure of gratuitous representations of serial murder? Is this pleasure we derives, paranoiac or perverse?

EG: But of course, there is no direct line from the text (*corpus*) to the body (*corps*). For most people, narrative competence prevents a simple correlation between fiction and behavior. In other words, quite early in childhood we acquire the tools to distinguish between the “what if” of fictional games and the practical rules of living. Which means, these representations of gratuitous violence are not so much about ethics rather than aesthetics. They are about the proliferation of new media in the era of late capitalism rather than an alleged spread of specular ‘perversion.’ Lawrence and Wilder’s chapters deconstruct American capitalism portrayed in the film *American Psycho* and the television series *Hannibal* respectively by analysing the problem of spectatorship from a strictly narratological perspective. Similarly, Khilnani’s critique of postmodern consumerism through body horror and abjection in the manga series *Tomie* reflects the moral issues raised in Qu’s chapter on serial killing as an explosively digital phenomenon in contemporary China.

AP: In which case, may we define the spectator’s persistence to witness such representations as a kind of traumatic compulsion to engage with a narrative of violence, much as we struggle to navigate a deeply violent and unequal society. If there is one parameter that we may safely agree to be ‘universal’ today, it is global inequality. Though inequality of course, manifests and functions in myriad ways and degrees, the figure of the serial killer has a way of transcending this category of violence. In this relatively egalitarian and shared space of violence that narrative fantasy affords the serial spectator, what is more significant—the fact that we feel complicit, or that we devise ways to justify our experience of pleasure. Does the murderous sublime in that sense, render us as an audience to be empathists seeking narrative justice, or psychopaths like the serial killers we get attracted to?

EG: Indeed, inequality is what is truly terrifying. Global inequality is what the pandemic both revealed and repressed through the boom of crime, fantasy, and speculative fiction. And it has not ended with lockdown-related deaths. The war in Ukraine rages on, but its mass graves seldom rise to the news headlines. Mass shootings and everyday crime in the US have become normalized, with the political debate mired in partisan platitudes. To think through these issues in the introduction to our volume, I revisited Hanna Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil”, which I previously dismissed. Now it seems to me that it may be useful if reversed: the evil of banality. It is not that violent representation creates or induces

actual violence but rather that it normalizes the distance between the spectator and the perpetrator. The spectator or the witness takes comfort in the fact that they are neither the killer nor the victim, and this comfort becomes addictive in its persistent repetition, which ultimately makes violence banal.

AP: Perhaps the roots of this evil of banality may be traced to the Victorian writers like Arthur Conan Doyle who mandated that the Anglocentric crime genre be dedicated to banality and proceduralism, rather than the pathology of the criminal mastermind. Following this, the Golden Age writers like Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers shored up perpetrators, victims, and weapons that were utterly banal. They created a dark kinship that forced the reader to see evil as a self-portrait. The banality of evil, of course, goes against the very discourse of the sublime in its quotidian repetitiveness. The serial killer becomes a sort of Everyman idealized through tabloid crime, newspapers, podcasts and sensational media reports, as Michaeli's chapter on Jack the Ripper explains. The serial killer became terrifyingly normal and ordinary in detective fiction—the 'Other' like us. This invokes a simulacrum of heroism that Foucault observed of the hanged man on the medieval scaffold.

EG: I agree that going back to the nineteenth-century discourses of the murderous sublime, precisely in order to examine how the criminals represented in Conan Doyle, De Quincey, and Wilde have evolved into the figure of the global serial killer is important. While the Covid-19 situation is unique, the pleasure in the consumption of violent narratives and violent representations is not. Between the two World Wars, for example, a full one-fourth of novels published in the UK were crime fiction. The Amazon and NYT bestseller charts are regularly topped by mysteries, thrillers, and true crime. Video games, such as *Manhunt* and *Call of Duty*, that position the gamer in the POV of a serial killer have grossed millions. And just as violence seems to be a necessary component in our narrative pleasures, so does the moral panic about it seem to be a necessary component of political grandstanding. The recent mass shootings in the US have revived the debate about gun violence in Hollywood movies, recycling the same arguments that were made in the 1980s about violent comics.

AP: This temporal urgency was the rationale for organizing our session "Murderous Sublime: Serial Killers and Serial Spectators" at the Modern Language Association's (MLA) Annual Conference in January 2021. It raised

important ethical and aesthetic questions such as how is the serial killer constructed in contemporary culture? Why does a murderous sublime continue to dominate mainstream media in the West? On what historical and cultural terms, do these graphic representations vacillate between discourses of 'normality' and 'abnormality'? The three panelists of our session, two of whom have been included in this volume, approached these questions from three distinct perspectives. They analysed the serial killer as narrative subject, the banality of violence that counters traditional definitions of the murderous sublime, and the complicity of the spectator. Not only had these issues been underrepresented in previous MLA conferences and publications on crime fiction, but research on serial killing and spectatorship still relies on archaic theories of the violent sublime.

EG: In many ways, my participation at that conference and engagement in developing this volume is an argument with myself on precisely those outdated theories of violence. In my first published book *Bloodscripts*, I tried to theorize narrative representations of violence using the concept of the "violent sublime", which I defined as "the sense of the unspeakable and unrepresentable, an interruption of language, a suspension of thought" (2003). In my view then, the allure of violent representation resided in the chasm between language and body; between what can be said, described, and fit into a narrative, and the raw physicality of bodily harm, pain and suffering. Murderers, and especially serial killers who kill for pleasure, are addicts of the sublime. And while my book focused on the narrative modalities of the perpetrator of violence, which I described as the "subject of torture," "subject of discipline," and "subject of ideology," I assumed that the position of the reader/spectator mirrors that of the protagonist. In other words, if killers are junkies of the sublime, so are their groupies.

AP: I suppose I should respond to this by stating that my chapter is an argument with your argument with *Bloodscripts*. In thinking of the tension between pleasure and pain through a feminist critique of *mens rea* or criminal intent, I adopted an intersectional approach. This, of course, required that I follow your footsteps to trace the roots of the aesthetics of murder back to the nineteenth century. My research began with the Victorians, who were your point of departure in *Bloodscripts*. Nineteenth-century literature provides us with three distinct theoretical positions to engage with the gratuitousness of serial killing, whether we read Holmes

or Dorian Gray. Lisa Downing, in her pioneering history of crime from Lacenaire to Jack the Ripper, refers to this as the “Sadeian Subject.” This is the prototype of the modern serial killer like Hannibal Lecter and Patrick Bateman. In Victorian criminology, the serial killer was a pathological individual or symbol of masculine exceptionalism.

EG: Since then, the concept of the murderous sublime has become ubiquitous, and therefore mutable. While I still believe that the violent sublime is an important component of serial killing, I have shifted my attention to the comfort derived from the serial consumption of violent narratives. This comfort cannot be adequately theorized in terms of the sublime, for the simple reason that “sublime comfort” is an oxymoron. Other theories needed to be addressed, in particular those related to seriality in different media and to the connection between seriality and post/modernity. The work of Robyn Warhol and other theorists who explored the rise of serial narratives in the Victorian age and their digital explosion as fan fiction, movie franchises, sequels and prequels, has helped me to think of serial killing and serial spectatorship as common rather than exceptional; domesticated rather than transgressive; and banal rather than sublime.

AP: The subject of the serial killer has outgrown the Anglocentric stereotype of the introverted male psychopath by considering the lens of gender, race, ethnicity, ableism, and colonialism in popular narratives. Serial killer fiction may be considered ‘World Literature’ in a truly transnational sense. Therefore, we need more social, anthropological, and narrative studies on how this category has expanded. Rather than simply adding more case studies from across the spectrum in a vague gesture of nationalist inclusivity, a focus on global spectatorship can lend rigour. Going forward then, the model of the persistent witness and complicit spectatorship may contribute new ways of thinking about violence across global media.

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Index

- Abattoir Elegantiarium* 22, 33–52
- Abberline, F. 94
- aberration 17, 74–75, 152, 159
- abhuman 228, 235
- abject 23, 51, 67
 defined 57–58
 transgressions of the murderer 228
- abjection 244
 due to breakdown 57–58
 in human reaction 51
 seriality and 58
- abnormality 242, 246
- Absolution, The* 194–195
- accomplice 3, 22, 34, 229
- Ackroyd, P. 110
- acte gratuit 9, 225
- active participant 12, 51, 176, 206
- adaptable 1
- adaptation
 of *American Psycho* 157
 cinematic 25, 33, 46, 107
 film 5, 34, 152, 168–169
 licensed 36
 postmodern 5
 transmedia 13–14
- Administrative Provisions for the Internet*
 Audio-Video Program Service (2007) 170
- “Adopted Daughter” 59–60
- aesthetic/aestheticism 3, 18, 22, 34–35, 40,
 43, 49, 83–84, 216
 engagement 83
 of murder 104, 256
 pleasure 72–73
- affect 21, 105, 121, 139, 241
- affective 27, 51
 aesthetic-affective process 187
 expressions and studied responses 81
 investment in narratives of violence 241
 involvement 60
 responses and multisensory perceptions 70
- agency 75–76, 79–84, 91, 206, 217, 220
 erotic 58
 and representation 74
- agent 35, 38, 47, 80, 105–106, 132
- aggressive masculinity 106
- alien 25, 152, 163
- alienation 26, 207, 210–211, 227
- Alighieri, D. 125
- allegorical 140–141, 196, 207
- All that Remains* (1992) 120
- ambiguity 49, 51, 82, 84, 111, 186, 193, 195
 epistemological 96–98, 202
 representational 233
- America 56
- American Psycho* (1991) 25, 119–122, 152–164
- amoral 3, 81
- amusement 35
- anatomy 96
- Anderson, G. 163
- Anglo-American cultural construction 81
- anglocentrism 19
- Anglo-Saxon 4, 6, 24, 105–108, 112
 legal concept 105
 mythology 6
- Anne Perry and the Murder of the Century*
 104
- annihilation 159
- antagonistic 43
- Antichrist* (2009) 121, 123–124
- anti-climax 133
- anti-genre 123, 125, 133
- anxiety 10–11, 66, 72, 115, 163, 219
- apocalyptic narrative 17
- Arata, S. 95–96
- arbiter 22, 33, 39
- archetype 58
- Arendt, H. 14
- Argento, D. 26
- arrest 38, 97, 133, 232
- artist 43, 48, 111–112, 128–129, 131, 144, 211
- artwork 47
- assassin 80–81, 96
- assaults 48, 152
- atrocities 127, 130, 224
- attempted murder 2, 213
- Auden, W.H. 123–124
- audience 8, 36, 51, 60, 121, 142, 147, 149, 232
- audio-visual
 cues 83
 framing strategies 73
- Auster, P. 123

- author 97, 123, 154, 167–169, 187–188, 212
autopsy 94–95, 217
avatars 60, 242
Ayyash, M.M. 15–16
- backward birth 108
banal 14–17, 25, 128, 131, 133, 152, 175, 239, 245, 247
banality
 in *American Psycho* 152–164
 of evil 14–16, 25, 153, 163, 244–245
baroque 26, 35, 42, 45–46, 207, 217, 225
Batchelor, D. 50
Bateman 158
Bateman, P. 44
Baudelaire, C. 2–3, 26–27, 107
Baudrillard, J. 27, 61
beautiful 142, 191–192
beauty 44, 46, 66, 128, 131, 191, 206, 215, 219
Beck, M. 201
Bedford Hills Correctional Facility 76
Beijing 100
Big Little Lies 103
binaries 4, 34, 231
biological
 biases within Western criminology 9
 effluent 50
 explanations 94
 mother 60
 theories of criminology 7
biosocial 6, 21
Bird with the Crystal Plumage, The (1970) 26
Bjerke, A. 202
Black Death 16
blog 166, 168–172, 176
blogosphere 170–172, 176
blood 185–202
Bloodscripts: Writing the Violent Subject (2003) 11, 200
Bloom, A. 49
bodies 3, 6, 16, 45, 47–48, 57–60, 65, 82, 90–91, 125, 127, 131, 212–213, 224–228, 235
bodily 57, 67, 246
body 23, 44–47, 57, 59–60
Bordertown 185
borealism 193, 200
boredom 10, 17
Braddon, M.E. 103
Britain 100
broad­sides 24, 92–93, 95–96, 98
Bronfen, E. 66
Brown, L. 89
brutally 22, 57, 93, 106, 145
Bundy, T. 158
Burke, E. 8, 77
Burke's theory of the sublime 8
Buxton, D. 63
- cannibal 42
cannibalistic serial killer 75
canon 18, 20, 22, 24–25, 123, 169, 212
canonical 20, 36–37
capitalism 52, 63
capital punishment 74
carceral 8
carnival of crime 7, 22
Carter, A. 24, 116
Cater Street Hangman, The 102
catharsis 16–17
Cavell, S. 143
censorship 110–111, 156, 170
centre 19–20, 48, 166
Certain Hunger, A (2020) 23, 71, 73–79, 82
Cézanne, Murder, and Modern Life (2013) 373
Cézanne, P. 3
Chambers, R. 207
Chandler, R. 123
Chapman, A. 89
character 1, 33, 40–41, 51, 80–82, 159, 191, 199
characterization 36
charnelscuro 49
Chassaigne, P. 93
Chesterton, G.K. 120
chiaroscuro 49, 209
Chicago 100
child 6, 14, 47, 58, 60, 103, 107–108, 116, 129–130, 160, 190, 196–198, 224, 228
childhood 115
China 20
China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) 166
Chinese digital fiction 25–26
Chinese internet literature 166–179
Chinese serial killers 169–171
Chinese suspense author 167–169

- Christie, A. 104, 188
 Chun-jae, L. 22
 cinema 9, 19, 27, 49, 116, 124, 133, 197, 205–221, 234–235
City of Glass (1985) 123
 class 41, 90–92, 94, 97, 109, 113, 141, 193–194, 198, 241
 class conflict 141
 claustrophobic haunted-house horror 202
 Cleland, J. 124
Clock Tower 22
Clockwork Orange, A 157
 Close, G.S. 216
 closure 9–10, 13, 17, 62–65, 68
 co-acting 77
 cognitive defamiliarization 189
 cognitive estrangement 189
 cognitive mapping 240
 cold-blooded 6
 collective cultural consciousness 59
 colonial 109
 comedy 79–80, 125
 comics 56, 245
 commercialization 168
 commit 1, 11, 14, 23–24, 105–107, 120, 178, 243
 committing 103–105, 107, 127, 169, 186, 225
 common-or-garden criminals 15
 communicated insanity 107
 communication 56, 168, 171–172, 179, 213–214
Companion to Victorian Literature & Culture, A 95–96
 complicit 4, 10, 13–14, 110, 173, 243–244
 spectatorship 247
 complicity 14, 19, 25, 40, 46, 48, 144, 163, 173, 179, 228, 243, 246
 compulsive repetition 10–11
 conceptualization 6, 8, 178
 condemned 2, 98, 104, 109–110, 116, 143
 confessional 71, 73, 75, 79, 110
 consolatory construction 120
 consolatory literature 122
 conspiracy 80, 108
 conspired 103
 consumer capitalism 23, 39, 46, 52
 consumerism 10, 22, 42, 244
 consumption-oriented nature of serial killer 75
 contained 58–60, 66, 68, 157, 220
 contemporary
 convergence culture 174
 crime writing 103
 cultural memory 90
 electronic media 9
 horror 119
 imagination 98
 literature and film 4
 Nordic detectives 199
 continuous 26, 62, 128
 convergence culture 174
 copycat crimes 120
 Cornwell, P. 120
 corporeal 39, 57, 144, 234–235
 corporealized 227
 corpse 3, 12, 57, 66, 77, 92, 115, 169
 corruption 25, 140, 159, 190
 co-thinking 77
 counter-discourse 106–109
 Covid-19 pandemic 10
 crime 83
 culture 8
 fiction 20–21, 80, 83, 90, 97, 100, 102, 104, 113, 120, 143, 168, 185, 187–188, 190, 198, 202, 216
 fiction criticism 120
 narratives 83
 -oriented serial media 11–12
 scene 3, 7, 45, 91, 93, 114, 178, 217
Crimecon 12
Crime Fiction as World Literature 20
Crime Stories: India Detectives 22
 criminal
 to ghosts 201–202
 intent 2, 108–109, 115, 246
 justice 12–13, 76
 profiling 10–11
 subject 104, 106
 criminality 7, 83, 102, 104, 108, 143
Criminal Spectre in Law, Literature and Aesthetics: Incriminating Subjects, The 105–106
 criminological 4–6, 23, 104, 106, 107n5, 110–111, 114–115, 143
 criminologist 6, 111–112, 143

- criminology 6–7, 9, 19, 21–22, 24–26, 104, 106–108, 143–144
 crisis 10, 239–240
Critique of Judgment 73
 cruelty 57, 90, 144, 186
csi: Crime Scene Investigation 217
 culpable 106
 culture/cultural
 commodities 174, 179
 conjunction 7
 context 21
 hybridity 18
 imaginary 104, 178
 industry 122, 122*n*, 122*n*4, 174
 kinship 20–21
 mobility 21
 voyeurism 90
 cyberculture 170
 cyberspace 174, 179

Daily Chronicle 96
Dancer in the Dark (2000) 124
 dandy 34, 43–44, 48
 Daniels, D. 71, 75–76, 79, 82
 Davidson, P. 26, 192
 Davis, N. 209
Day is Dark, The (2011) 191–192, 197
 death 2, 4, 15, 25, 65–66, 74, 110, 126, 169, 173, 224, 233
 drive 65–67
 notice 25–26
Death Notice (web series) 25–26
Death Notice trilogy 166, 168, 170–173, 176, 179
 decadence 10, 34, 40, 46
 decadent 39–40, 43, 45–46, 52, 112
 decapitated 215–216
 decomposing 227–228
Deep Red (1975) 26
 defamiliarization 121, 121*n*3, 122, 124, 186, 189–195
 defendant 106
 degeneration 66–67, 111–112
 Delacroix, E. 128
 Deleuze, G. 61
Delhi Crime 22
 delight 23, 52, 70–71, 84, 104, 112, 157
 del Toro, G. 20
 Demme, J. 46–47
 denouement 64, 103, 112
 Denson, S. 171
 depression 124
 desire 5, 7, 23, 59, 63, 65, 161, 235
 detachment 49, 59*n*2, 233
 detective novel 64, 80, 106
 deviance 474, 75
Devil's Star, The (2012) 202
 diabolical 46, 99
 dialectical 122, 139
 Dickens, C. 9
 diegetic 26, 42, 61, 208, 211, 218, 225
 digital banal 166–179
 digital capitalism 174–176
 digitalisation 175
 digital media 22
 digital representation 8–9
 digital serialisation 166–167, 172
 digital seriality 172
 Dine, S.S.V. 64
 disability 144–145
 discourse 6–7, 13, 21, 23, 90, 92–95, 106–109, 114, 177, 242, 245
 analysis 21, 23–24
 disembodied 171, 22
 disfigured 59, 92
 disproportionate sensationalism 74
 dissected 47, 227
 distant observation 23, 71, 84
 distress 23, 70–71, 77, 84, 94, 125
 disturbing 4, 6, 33, 46, 52, 152, 186, 189, 201, 210, 232
 diverse 8*n*6, 19, 21, 104–105, 240–241
Divine Comedy, The 125
 Doane, M.A. 66
 documentaries 3, 22, 130, 241–242
Dogme 95 121*n*2, 123
Dogville (2003) 124
 Dolarhyde, F. 120
 Dollimore, J. 43–44
 Dombrowski, A. 373
 domestic abuse 239
 domestic noir 102–103
Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction 103
Donnie Brasco 157
 Donovan, S. 43
Don't Deliver Us from Evil 107
 doppelgänger 113, 200

- Downing, L. 8–9
 Doyle, C. 9, 97, 188
 Drayton, J. 24, 105
Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga 56
 drug cartel 169
 Dumas, R. 58
 Du Maurier, B. 51
 dysfunctional 177, 198
 criminal justice system 177
 dystopia 2, 10, 202, 239

East London Observer 96–97
 Eco, U. 122
 ecological aesthetic 109
 ecological criminology 108
 Eddowes, C. 89
 Eichmann, A. 15
Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963) 14
 electronic media 9
 Ellis, B.E. 25, 119, 152
 Ellison, C. 102
 embodiment 40, 66–67, 106–107
 emotions 83
 distress 77
 empathy 14, 81, 83, 220
 emphatic personal distress 71–72
 encounter 1, 26, 82, 114, 125, 147, 168, 176, 205–207, 218, 224, 227, 230
 endlessly 22, 57, 59, 65, 67, 211, 227, 243
 England 90
 enjoyment 65
 entangled observer 23, 84
 entangled observers
 in *Killing Eve* 79–83
 entertainment 6, 10, 16–18, 56, 92, 166, 170–172, 175
 capitalism 171–172
 entity 59, 124, 192
 epicurean 41
 episodes 4, 35, 46, 50, 57, 60–62, 98, 172
 epistemological 7, 14, 61, 108, 121, 186, 195–198, 202, 215, 227
 ambiguity 186, 195–198, 202
 erotic 38, 43, 58, 76, 113, 124, 217, 220, 227, 232
 state 76
 estrangement 26–27, 189–190, 206
 ethics(al) 14, 16, 22, 39, 73, 83–84, 133, 198, 244
 boundaries and aesthetic openings 83–84
 and justice 83
 etiology 129–132, 159
 eumenides 176–179
 euphemisms 93
 eurocentric 6–7, 9, 17–20, 22–24, 242
 Eurocentric murderous sublime 6
 Eurocentrism 18
 evil
 of banality 13–17
 banality and 152–153
 in fiction 103
 exalted paranoia 107
 exceptional 6, 24–25, 81
 excesses 34, 40, 52, 56–68, 147
 existentialism 49
 exotic 26, 76, 110, 186
 expressionism 3
 expressionistic 207, 209
 extralegal 26
 eyewitness 71, 94, 147, 168, 212–213, 235

 Facebook 12
Face of a Stranger, The 103
 fallen women 91, 93
 fallibility 113
 fan 34, 36, 46, 52, 80, 166, 247
 fandom 36–37
Fanny Hill (1748) 124
Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre, The (1973) 195
 fantasy 44, 56, 66, 102, 141
 reassignment 189
Fantasy and Mimesis (1984) 189
 fascinated 206
 fashion 33–35, 39, 42, 155
 fatalism 49
 feeble-minded 106
 female
 serial killer narratives 83–84
 violence 75
 violence in *A Certain Hunger* 74–79
Female Corpses in Crime Fiction: A Transatlantic Perspective 216
 feminine economy 114

- femininity 66–67, 75, 116
 feminist
 criminology 107
 cultural criminology 104
femme fatale 65–66, 68
 fetish 3, 23, 159, 219n8
 fetishization 24, 58, 60
 fiction(al) 13, 74, 83
 heritage 111
 figurative 141
 film 4, 6, 8, 22, 24, 66, 79, 115, 121, 139, 141,
 146, 149, 152, 208, 226–227, 234
 filmmaker 142, 207, 228, 231
 fin-de-siècle 34, 43, 167
First Intimate Contact, The 168–169
 first-person narrator 71
 Flynn, G. 103
 Folie a deux 35, 107, 111, 114
 folk horror 86, 189, 197–198, 202
 forensic psychology 76
 formal subsumption 63
 formula 10–11, 23, 57, 62, 64, 93, 122, 132, 174
 formulaic 58, 60, 62, 103, 209
 Fortune, M. 103
 Foucault, M. 17–18, 74, 107
 Fowles, J. 110
 frames 43, 208, 216, 220
Framlingham Weekly News, The 94
 French, K.M. 51
 Freudian 193, 207–208, 230–231, 235
 fringed hole 116
 Frye, N. 140
 Fuller, B. 22
- Gallery city 26, 205–221
 Gallese, V. 70–71
 Garelick, R. 43
 gaze 27, 43, 59, 76, 207, 216
 gender 109
 -binariness 74
 -stereotypical 75
 genocide 16
 genre 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 34, 37–39, 80, 82–83,
 123–124
 geographical 6, 26, 189, 191
 giallo 207
 girls 24, 58–59, 107, 109, 115
Girl Who Died, The (2021) 191, 202
Girl Who Knew Too Much, The (1963) 209
- Glitre, K. 49
 global 6–9, 11, 13, 15, 17–18, 23, 56, 166, 189,
 239
 global digital spectatorship 17
 globalism 10
 Global South 19–20, 26
 glocal 20
 glocalization 193
Golden Glove, The (2019) 125
 Gomel, E. 74, 160, 178–179
Gone Girl 103
 good and evil 80, 103, 157
 gothic 39, 78, 119–120, 125, 130
 Gould, G. 128
 Graham, P. 24, 104
Grand Guignol 45
 graphic 4, 21–22, 65, 94, 104, 113, 121
 gratification 35, 172, 233
 gratuitous 2–3, 24, 113, 119, 157, 240
 Gray, C. 102
 Gray, D. 43, 111
 Green, A.K. 103
 Griffiths, A. 73–74
 grotesque 34, 48, 60, 82, 91–92, 162, 228
 grotesqueness 67
 grotesquerie 22–23
 gruesome 24, 42, 67, 71, 76–77, 103, 115, 139,
 142, 145, 149, 199, 239
 gruesomeness 57, 64–65
 guilty 2, 6, 24, 105–106, 110, 113–117, 127, 130
 mind 2, 24, 105–106, 110, 130, 233
 Gumb, J. 120
 gutting 77
- Hamilton-McKenna, C. 109
 Haner, T. 160
Hannibal (series) 22, 43, 52
 Haohui, Z. 25–26, 167
 Harris, T. 46–47, 120
 Hawthorne effect 76
 Hayes, C. 162
Heavenly Creatures (film) 103, 105, 109, 115–
 116
 hedonistic 44
 hegemonic 19, 116
 “Hellfire Club” 113
Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer (1986) 121–
 122
Hermeneutic of Violence, A (2019) 15–16

- hermeneutics 16
 of violence 16
- hero 23, 41, 103, 120, 178, 199–200, 217
- heroic 120, 198
- heroine 23, 79–80, 82, 116, 191–192, 209, 220
- heteronormativity 34
- heterosexist 108, 125
- high literature 120–121
- Hindley, M. 9
- Hirst, D. 47
- historical romance 102
- Hitchcock, A. 19
- Hitler, A. 15
- Ho, B.J. 20, 22, 25
- homicide 4, 45, 130
- homogeneity 64
- homogenous 19, 241
- homosexual 107, 112
 propensities 107
- Honka, F. 125
- horror 8, 18, 22, 25–26, 46, 119
 -fiction dimension 99
- Hound of the Baskervilles, The* 188
- House of Secrets: The Burari Deaths* 22
- House that Jack Built, The* 119–133
- howcatchem 132–133
- ‘How Stories Make us Feel’ or Kukkonen’s (2019) 70
- hubris 133
- Hulme, J.M. 105, 107, 114
- Hulme-Parker case 103, 108
- human body 47, 57–60, 67, 78
- Human Condition, The* (1958) 15
- humanity 99
- human psychological deviance 75
- Hume, K. 189
- Hutchings, P. 105–106
- Huysmans, J.K. 43
- Hwan, C.D. 140–141
- hybridity 17–18
- hyperreal 211–212
- Hypnotist, The* (2009) 199
- Ice Museum, The* 192
- idealistic 140
- Idea of North, The* 192
- identification 17, 40, 51, 172, 178, 225, 229–231, 234
- identity 45, 59, 81, 89, 104, 116, 132, 139, 142, 158, 160–162, 202, 206
- ideological 15, 139, 147, 159, 173, 195
- ideology 139, 158, 174, 192*n*, 246
- Idioterne* (1998) 124
- illusionistic identification 231
- Illustrated London News, The* 93
- Illustrated Police News, The* 93–94, 96, 98
- Il Superuomo di Massa* (1976) 122
- immersive 73, 84
- immutability 79
- imprisonment 110
- impulse 65, 102, 104, 106, 156–157, 163, 206, 218–220, 228
- incorporeal 16
- individual 10–11, 18, 23, 46, 79, 83, 97, 159, 172–174, 206, 208, 212, 214, 219, 225, 227, 247
- inhumane 64
- insane 1, 107*n*5, 108, 143
- insanity plea 106, 112
- institutionalized violence 159
- institutions 25, 132–133, 167, 225
- instrumentality 15–16, 147
- intense narcissism 107
- internal knowledge 13
- Internet 66–179
- interpretation 99, 141, 143, 145, 147, 172, 179, 229
- intimate-partner violence 239–240
- Intimate Violence and Victorian Print Culture* (2015) 90
- investigation 6, 38–39, 47–48, 50, 97, 111, 173
- involvement 9, 23, 60, 63, 71, 77, 82, 84, 105, 173
- I Remember You* (novel) 196, 202
- ironic 47, 71, 81
- isolation 16
- Ito, J. 57
- Jackson, P. 24, 109, 115
- Jack the Ripper 1, 4*n*4, 5, 8, 22, 24, 89–100, 102, 107, 112–113
- Jahn-Sudmann, A. 171
- James, P.D. 104
- Jauss, H.R. 122
- Jenkins, H. 174
- Jenkins, P. 46
- jodidar* 27, 223–236

- Jonasson, R. 202
- Jouissance* 65, 68
- journalistic 89–90, 95–96
- Joyce, L. 103
- justice 139–140, 157, 166–179
 criminal 12, 76, 157, 169, 177
 ethics and 83–84
 fundamental 38–39
 normative concepts 38
- Kalidasa 20
- Kant, I. 72
- Kaplan, E.A. 66
- Kashyap, A. 27
- Katla* 185
- Katz, B. 47
- Katz, F.E. 153
- Kavenna, J. 192
- kawaii* 58, 60
- Keen, S. 72
- Kelleter, F. 9, 63, 172–173
- Kelly, M.J. 89, 91
- Kepler, L. 26, 199
- Kepler, S.L. 189
- Kermode, F. 10
- keywords 17, 188
- kill 2, 5, 7, 11, 15, 27, 65, 103–105, 108–109,
 111–113, 115, 126, 144, 146, 158–159, 223–
 226, 228, 231–233, 246
- Killing Eve* (2017–2020) (television series)
 23, 73, 79–83
- Kimmel, M.S. 224
- kinship 83
- Kiss the Girls* (1997) 132
- Knee, A. 218
- (un)knowability of violence 16
- knowledge space 12
- Kooijman, J. 161
- Kristeva, J. 50–51, 57–58
- Kunzle, D. 44
- Lacanian 23, 65–66, 68
- Lacenaire, P.F. 1–2
- Laine, T. 161
- Lake of the Dead, The* 202
- language manipulation 92–93
- La ragazza* 209–210
- Last Rituals* (2007) 201–202
- Laughing Policeman, The* (1968) 193
- law 12, 106, 225
- law and order 120
- Lazarus* 200
- legal
- Anglo-Saxon 24, 105–106
- and creatively 36
- Icelandic structure 199
- justice 169
- medico- 4n4, 24, 104, 108, 111
- narrative of the human 106
- Les Mystères de Paris* (1843) 122
- Levy, P. 12
- libidinal 39
- Library Journal* 155
- Liddle, D. 98
- Life and Memoirs of John Churton Collins* 97
- liminal 82, 186, 209
- liminalities 34, 37, 41, 52
- linguistic cues 77
- Linna, J. 192–193, 199
- listeners 12, 83, 241
- literary
- aetiology 112
- and cinematic 13
- and cinematic incarnations of Lecter 41
- creation and circulation 20
- discourse 92–95
- Eurocentric 20
- expression and cultural production 167
- sensational 56
- series 63
- titillation 216
- literature and media, serial violence in global
- evil of banality 13–17
- murderous sublime 4–9
- spacetime of violence 9–13
- structuring serial killing 21–27
- transnationalism and transmediality
 17–21
- lockdown 239–240
 crushing boredom of 17
- Logsdon, R. 46
- Lombroso, C. 6–8
- Lost Village, The* (2020) 202
- Love, Death, Robots* (series) 2–4
- lower classes 90, 92–93, 98
- L'Uccello* 216
- lurid 152–164
- lustmord 4, 4n4–5n4

- lustmörd* 4–5, 474
 Lynch, D. 19

 Maase, K. 176
 macabre 12, 59–60, 74, 202
Mad Men (2007–2015) 43
 magazine 56, 92, 119
 male gaze 75, 116
 malice 159
 manga 56–61, 66–68
manière couillard 373
 Manson, C. 158
 Marriot, J. 99
 Marshall, E. 109
 Marxist 23, 63, 201
 masculine/masculinity 114–115
 exceptionalism 8–9
 serial killer 21
 mass consumption 8
 mass entertainment 17
 Maunder, A. 98
 McCorkle, R. 120
 McNaughtan, D. 106
 meaning-making 141
 media spectacle 24
 mediation 60, 167–168, 171, 175, 235
 media violence 12–13
 medium 11–13, 47, 79, 234
 Medlicott, R. 107
Melancholia (2011) 121, 123–124
Memories of Murder 20, 22, 25, 139–143, 146–147
 memory 79, 90, 150, 202
 Menninghaus, W. 72
 mens rea 24, 102–116
 merciless killing 169
 metanarratives 159
 metaphorical 49–50, 141, 205
 metaphors 93
 meta-reflection 83
 metatextual 146
Midsummer 198
 mimetic 186–189, 194–195, 229, 235
 Minnich, E. 16
 minority cultures 240
 mirroring 71, 178, 210
Mirror Man, The (2022) 201
 mirror men 195–201
 misanthropic 43
 mise-en-scene 22, 33, 40, 140
 misogynistic 23, 46, 126, 133, 152, 216, 240
 misrecognise 178
 mixed emotions 72
 mixed feelings 71–74
 Miyazaki, T. 59
 mobility 17–18
 modern 8
 modus operandi 89, 125, 127
 mold ideology 139
 Monk, W. 103
 monster 5–7, 99, 116, 122, 132, 192
 monstrosity 123–124
 monstrous 5, 8, 46, 60, 84
Monthly Halloween 56
 Moore, G. 98
 moral 23–24, 49, 71, 75, 81, 83, 120, 127
 moralistic 131–132
 moral panic 23, 108, 245
 morbid 215–216
 Moretti, F. 20
 Moriarty, L. 103
 “Morita Hospital Episode” 59
 mortality 239
 mortuary 91
 Moscow 20
Mother and Child Divided 47
 motif 80, 112, 212
 motion picture 79
 motive 23–24, 83, 104–105, 108–109, 112, 115
 motiveless 4, 6, 11, 147, 225
 motivelessness 9
 movie 26, 119, 124, 127, 210, 218–220, 247
Mrs. Prebble 112–113
mukhti 223
 multicultural multiplicity 18
 multimedia 10
 multisensory 70, 77
 multisensory imagery 77
 Mulvey, L. 27, 116
 murder
 -fancier 127
 fantasy of 185–189
 and meaning 139–150
 mystery 26, 233
 rate 185
 murderer 3, 97, 116, 128–129, 215
Murder on the 31st Floor (1966) 202
 murderous sublime 4–9, 23, 73, 176–179

- Murders in the Rue Morgue* 106
 mutilation 67, 97, 160–161, 230
 mutual 51, 71, 80, 82, 98, 194–195, 206
My Soul to Take (2009) 192, 196
 mystery genre 208
- narcissism 107
 narratee 77
 narratives 8–13, 16–21, 23, 26, 60–61, 65, 70–84, 90–92, 111, 121, 155, 161
 closure 9–10
 gratification 172
 narrator 77
 narratorial 95
 National Criminal Investigation Department 199
 Nazi, F.-D. 82
 neo-noir 39, 49
Netflix 2–4, 17–18, 22, 185, 239, 241–243
 Netizens 168, 174
 New Journalism 95
 New Zealand 109
 Nichols, M.A. 89, 91
 Nietzschean 41, 124
 Nilsson, L. 19–20
 nineteenth-century 3, 6, 21, 33–34, 43, 83, 102–103, 106, 110, 245
 Nixon, N. 119–120
 non-anglo 188
 non-eurocentric 9
 non-human 106, 148
 non-mimetic 187–188, 195
 non-Western 6, 9, 25
 Nordau, M. 111–112
 Nordic noir 26, 185–202, 242
 normality 123–124, 132–133
 and abnormality 242–243, 246
 and monstrosity 123–124
 novel 6, 13, 23, 25, 34–35, 37, 41–42, 45–46, 71, 73, 75, 78–80, 82, 89, 98, 102–103, 105–106, 111–115, 119, 122, 124, 152, 154–156, 160, 185, 194, 196–197, 201–202, 207
Novelty of Newspapers, The 98
Nymphomaniac (2013) 121, 123–124
- Objet petit a 65
 observance 76, 84
 observation 70–84
 and visceral involvement 23
- observer
 corporealized 227
 entangled 23
 meta- 76
 of observed observers 73
 role 80
 sociological 79
 observing 50, 76–78, 80, 143
 obsession 2, 43, 58–59, 80, 115, 143, 156, 208, 212
 obsessive compulsive disorder 130
Odin's Child (2013) 190
 online
 avatar 167, 176
 community of serial readers 167
 dating 167
 entertainment 166
 game 166
 imagined community 172
 publication 167
 publishing 170
 reader base 170
 reader-cum-consumer 167
 readership 26
 sleuths 12
 social networking and dating 168
 solicitation 179
 spectators 179
- onscreen 22, 34, 45–46, 48, 52, 115, 216, 231
 onto-epistemological 104
 ontological drift 186, 201
Opera (1987) 220
 ordinariness 1, 7, 25, 128, 139–150, 157
 ordinary 15, 17, 25, 128, 132, 139, 141, 145, 147–149
ordnungszwang 131
 organised crime 169
 organs 22–23, 46, 52, 59, 67
otaku 58–59
 “Otaku killer” 59
 other 17–18, 25–26
 compulsive repetition 10
 distortions 12
 Hannibal texts 47
 narrative coherence 11
 otherness 21, 192, 207, 228*n*4
 outré 186, 200
- Pacman* 22

- painting 3–4, 44, 127, 168
 palimpsestic 36, 61
Pall Mall Gazette, The 99
 Palmer, R.B. 49
 pandemic 239–247
 paradoxical 8, 139, 146, 217, 233
 paranoiac 2, 22, 107
Parasite 140–141
 para-social 172
 Parker, H. 109, 116
 Parker, P. 103, 107, 114
 Park Hyun Gyu, 144, 147–148
 participatory culture 12, 173, 179
 passante 206
 passion for perceiving 227
 “passion for sameness” 11
 pathological 7–8, 23, 113, 242, 247
 pathologized 5, 106
 patriarchal 19, 74, 102, 107, 113, 224
 pattern 57, 93, 111, 122, 125, 130, 145–146, 158, 169, 229, 232
Penny Illustrated Paper, The 93
Pentecost Alley 113–114
 performance 2, 7, 22, 43, 56, 128
 performative 27, 73, 226
 peripeteia 103
 perpetrators 14, 75, 83, 93, 96–97, 130, 198, 241, 245–246
 perpetuation 62–63, 94
 perplexity 72
 Perry, A. 24, 103–105, 113
 persistence 2, 4, 6–7, 19, 24, 243–244
 persistent witnessing 21, 23, 243
 personal distress 23, 70–71
 person-centred approach 108, 131
 perspective 18, 34, 41, 48–49, 51, 71–73, 79–80, 131, 143, 194, 212, 215–216, 221, 240, 242, 244
 perverse 2, 20, 48, 52, 65, 68, 126, 145–146
 perversion 4n4, 21, 244
 perversity 60, 65, 68, 109, 144
 phallocentrism 8n6, 24, 104–105, 111, 116
 phantasmagoric 186, 211
 philosophical 70, 78, 190
Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful, A (1757/59) 78
 photograph 91, 147–148
 phrenology 143
 physical self 67
 physiognomy 91, 141, 143–144
Picture of Dorian Gray, The 43, 114
 Piipponen, M. 21
 Piser, J. 96
 Pitt, C. 102
 platform 111, 172–173
 pleasure 7–8, 23, 64, 66–67, 72, 116, 142, 176, 220, 229
 pleasure-in-pain principle 65, 67
 plot 6, 10, 60, 62, 64, 73, 77, 81, 114, 145, 168, 192–193, 196–197, 208, 214
 podcasts 3, 12–14, 16–17, 239–240, 242, 245
 crime 12
 listeners 12
 Poe, E.A. 26–27, 66, 106, 215–216
 poetic 121, 196, 206–207
 poetics of restlessness 24, 119–133
 Polastri, E. 80
 police 25, 34, 38, 57, 96–97, 114, 145, 177, 194, 229
 political 15–16, 19, 24–25, 91, 95, 140, 147, 191, 239
 pop culture icon 75
 popular culture 3–7, 19–20, 23, 62, 65–66, 158, 174, 239–240
 popular media 5, 23
 pornographic 48, 90–91, 116, 124
 pornography 116
 portrait 44, 121–122, 217–218, 245
 postcolonial 24, 242
 post-horror 123
 post-human 59
 subjectivity 59
 postmodern 3–5, 10, 39, 46, 59, 61–62, 161, 174–175, 214, 242
Postmortem (1990) 120
 post-Victorian criminology 25
Powers of Horror 57–58
 predator 5, 11n7, 80–81
 predilection 39, 112
 premeditation 46, 115
 Presdee, M. 7
 presentism 10
 press 89–92, 95–97, 99–100
 procedural 22, 34, 38–39, 44, 105, 193, 200
 procedurality 6, 245
 production 10, 12, 17, 22, 25, 33–34, 42, 45–46, 63, 172, 174, 191

- profane interpretations 96
Profondo rosso 216
 prostitutes 5n5, 24, 91, 93, 97, 112
 prostitution 113
 protagonist 13, 22, 25, 33, 37–39, 41–43, 75–76, 124–127, 131, 210, 213, 221
 proto-decadent 40
 provocative 22, 235
 proximity 2, 24–25, 72–73, 77–78, 109, 146, 152, 233
 psychoanalytic 21, 23, 36, 50
 psycho-horror 223–224
 psychological distancing mechanisms 72
 psychological distresses 123
 psychologise murderers 161
 psychology 7, 15, 76, 154, 158, 208, 240
 psychopath 3, 5, 75, 112, 132, 247
Psychopathia Sexualis (book) 4n4
 psychopathic compulsion 104
 psychopathic killings 4–5
 psychophysiological 70
 psychosexual 159
 dysfunction 159
 public 13, 38, 89–91, 95, 103, 154, 159, 166, 224
 sphere 95
Punch Magazine 92
 punished 105, 122, 133
 purposeless 15–16

 queer 8, 23, 34, 36–39, 43, 108, 111, 115–116

 radical 17, 21, 66, 105, 208, 226
 Radley, E. 114
Raman Raghav 2.0 (2016) 22, 27, 223, 233, 235
 reactionary 74, 216
 reader 2, 9, 11, 15, 23, 57, 67, 71, 76–77, 104, 196
 readership 20, 26, 97, 99, 171, 189, 240–241
 reading 2, 17, 23–24, 42, 56, 61, 65–66, 70–71, 77, 93, 103, 107, 115, 122–123, 143, 171–174, 176
 real 11–13, 17, 63, 126, 177, 216
 subsumption 63
 reciprocal 71
 recognition 148–150
Red Dragon (1981) 45, 120

 Redfern, E. 110
 reflection 35, 41, 79, 83, 157, 231
 regions 6, 17–19, 192
Regulations on Publication Administration (1997) 170
 Reich, M. 192–193
 Reid, E. 94
 reification 131
 ‘reign of terror’ 89
 Rembowska-Pluciennik, M. 77
 repeatedly 2, 12, 14, 64, 66, 71, 81, 129, 226, 234
 repetition 8–9
 compulsion 6, 21, 111, 243
 representation 4, 6, 8, 13–14, 16, 18, 25–26, 56, 58–59, 119, 168, 243
 representational violence 206
 rereading 11
 residual 23
 Ressler, R. 6–7
Resting Place, The (2022) 202
Return of the Dancing Master, The (2000) 192
 Richard III 14–15
 Ricoeur, P. 10
 Rintoul, S. 90
 ritual 2, 46, 242
 ritualistic 10, 13, 243
 Rivière, P. 108
 Rogers, T. 109
Roman Holiday (1953) 209
 romantic 8, 17, 19, 23, 36–38, 107–109, 129, 168, 209–210, 224, 227, 230, 232
Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction 17–18
 Rubery, M. 98

 sacred facts 96
 Sadeian subject 8, 24, 247
 Sadeian woman 116
Sadeian Woman: and the Ideology of Pornography, The 116
 sadism 186–187, 226–227
 sadistic voyeur 116
 “Sad Letter” (song) 145
 santhusti 226, 232
santushti 27, 223, 226
 sartorial 39

- satire 92, 155–156, 162
 satirical 71, 75, 92
 Saunders, R. 187
 savagery 5, 96, 192–193
 Savile, A. 1–2, 23
 scalpelgliatura 33, 40, 42
 scene 38, 45–47, 49, 74, 114, 142, 167
 Schodt, F.L. 56
 Schor, N. 19
 Schram, K. 193
 science-fictional mystery 187
 scopophilia 116
Search for Anne Perry, The 105
 self-absorption 131–132
 self-aware reflection 79
 self-aware subjects 74, 79
 self-doubt 113
 self-dynamic cultural agents 9, 11–12
 self-esteem 131–132
 self-estrangement 206
 self-generation 67
 self-justification 14
 self-reflexive confession 105
 self-reflexiveness 208
 self-reflexive reproduction 175
 self-replicating 62, 66
 self-representation 79
 self-sufficiency 65
 Seltzer, M. 10
 semiotic 50
 -psychoanalytic 50
 sensation 56, 92, 95, 98
 novel 98
 sensationalism 74, 98
 sensationalist exploitative 75
 sensational journalism 90, 93–96, 98
 sequence 6, 38, 51, 75, 77–78, 82, 171, 174, 220
 sequential 26, 166, 170–172, 174
 Séria, J. 24, 107
 serial blogging 171
 serial enjoyment 7
 seriality 8–10, 17, 83
 serialized 16, 25, 45, 56, 93–94
 serial killers 4–5, 104, 170
 fictions 132
 narratives 71, 74–75
 serial killing 17
 as entertainment 16
 serial murder 16–17
 criminology 26
 serial murderer 75
 serial murder narratives 171–174
 as digital banal 174–176
 serial narrative, production 12–13
 serial production 166
 serial rendition 60
 serial spectators 4
 distress and delight 70–71
 serial spectatorship 21
 serial violence 10–11
 series 2, 62–64, 67–68, 71, 82, 90, 166, 170, 179
 Setoodeh, R. 119
 sex/sexual
 abuse 194–195
 content 154
 memories 124
 mutilation 160
 work 89
 worker 2–4
 sexualized 46, 154, 216
 shojo 58, 60–61, 67, 240
shojo manga 58, 60–61, 67–68
Shots in the Mirror (2006) 157
 Siddique, N. 225
 signature 10–11, 166, 169, 177–178
 signification 57–58
 Sigurðardóttir, Y. 189, 191–192, 194, 196, 201–202
Silence of the Lambs, The (1988, 1991) 46–47, 120, 125
 simulacrum 59, 61, 245
 sin 112
 singular universal 20, 25
 Sinsalo, J. 202
Six Stories series 13
Six Walks in the Fictional Woods (1994) 122
 skin 1, 45–46, 48, 50
 skinning 77
 slasher 26, 141–142, 220–221, 224
 slicing 77
 Smith, J. 120
 social activism 95–96
 social and ethical restraints 73
 social criticism 96
 social egalitarianism 194
 social hierarchy 41

- society 7, 14, 23, 45, 132–133, 159, 174
- socio-cultural 17
- aberration 17
- sociopath 199, 226
- sociopathic 14, 103, 115
- socio-political 91, 194
- solipsistic 43
- spacetime 9–13
- Spacks, P.M. 11
- spectacular 40, 82, 90, 142, 158–160, 164
- spectacularized executions 74
- spectator 14
- spectatorship 17, 20–21, 179, 241, 247
- specular 7, 218, 244
- speculative fiction 187–188
- Spivak, G. 19
- splatzzatura 22
- Spotify* 3
- sprezzatura 34, 40, 44, 52
- Spy* and *Time* magazines 154
- Stead, W.T. 99
- Stephen, J.F. 105–106
- Stevenson, R.L. 99, 107
- storytelling 6, 9, 25, 56, 60–62, 67, 140, 172
- storyworld 71–73, 78
- Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The* 99, 107
- stranger perpetrated murders 6
- Strangled Woman* (painting) 3
- Stride, E. 89
- stripping 77
- stylistic 95, 98, 125, 191, 217
- subgenres 61, 223–224
- subject 4, 7–8, 18–19, 21, 26, 39, 74, 114, 139, 142, 170, 220, 225, 241
- of discipline 246
- of ideology 246
- of torture 246
- subjectivity 11, 59, 153, 206, 235
- subject/object 50
- Subject of Murder, The* 225
- sublime
- in Chinese internet literature 166–179
- comfort 247
- entangled observers in *Killing Eve* 79–83
- ethical boundaries and aesthetic openings 83–84
- female violence in *A Certain Hunger* 74–79
- mixed feelings 71–74
- serial spectator's distress and delight 70–71
- terror 78
- sublimity 166, 178–179
- subversive 44, 56, 74–75, 114, 116
- Sue, E. 122
- suicide 51, 57
- Summers, C.G. 23, 71, 75
- surplus 56, 59, 65, 67–68
- survivor 144–145
- suspense 167–169
- suspenseful 125, 130
- Sutton, H. 103
- Suvin, D. 188
- symbolic 50–51, 57, 60, 65, 82, 111, 150
- tableau mort 73–74, 78–79, 82
- tableau vivant* 73–74, 79, 82, 211
- tableaux morts* 73, 79, 84
- Tableaux parisiens* (1861) 205–206
- tabloids 93–94, 96, 98–100
- taboo 114, 154
- tachiyomi* 56
- Tae-Yoon, S. 144
- Talwai, S. 27
- Tang Dynasty 20
- tankobon* (standalone books) 56
- technological reproducibility 8–9, 26
- technology 59
- television 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 22, 35, 62–63, 242
- temporality 7, 10–11, 13, 22, 36, 111, 115
- Tenniel, J. 92
- terrifyingly normal 25, 152, 245
- terrorism 16
- textual 10, 18, 21, 35, 73, 83, 91
- analysis 21
- thanatos 11, 65
- theoretical 6–7, 18–19, 21, 24–25, 34, 61, 104, 111, 186–187, 240, 246–247
- The Star, Illustrated Police News, London Times* 23–24
- thriller 27, 71, 74, 79–80, 139, 207, 224
- Tibet 20
- Todorov, T. 122
- Tomie* 22–23, 56–68
- continuity, closure and capitalism 62–64

- excess and proliferation 57–62
- repetition and enjoyment 64–68
- torture 26, 116, 119, 140, 144, 160, 246
- Tourist Trap* (1986) 120
- toxic masculinity 113, 241
- traditional 6–13, 57, 60, 66, 107, 122–124, 128, 132, 167, 208, 246
- transculturally 190
- transgressive 6, 24, 74, 82, 110–111, 128, 154–155, 247
- transgressive courage 110
- translatable 21
- translation 18, 20–21, 52, 66, 148, 193–194, 200
- transmedia 13–14, 17–19, 21, 195
 - adaptations 13–14
- transmediality 17–21
- transnational 17–18, 20–21, 24, 56, 190, 195, 202, 240–242, 247
 - cultural phenomenon 20–21
 - digital spectatorship 17
- Transnational Crime Fiction: Mobility, Borders, and Detection* (2020) 21
- “Transnational Evil of Banality” 24–25
- transnationality 17
- Trapped* 185
- trauma 5, 109, 111, 199, 202
- traumatic 4, 115, 244
- travelog 26, 185–202
- trickster 80–81
- trivialisation of violence 175
- Troll, The* 202
- trope 4, 103, 110, 144, 158–159, 161, 167, 209, 216, 228
- true-crime community 13
- “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Series” (1928) 64
- ubiquitous 6, 15, 46, 56, 80, 93, 124, 179, 186, 201, 207, 216, 247
- uncanniness 3, 46, 207
- uncanny 22, 36, 57, 66, 178, 193, 198, 219
- unfortunates 93
- unheimlich 193
- unholy 46
- unintentional 67
- universalist 19, 240
- universal singularity 19
- Untraceable* (2008) 132
- urban 26–27, 89
 - aesthetics 190
 - encounters 205
 - expressionism 3
 - fantasy 187
 - representation 209
 - space 26, 210, 214, 219
 - topography 109
- urge 67, 75, 91, 173
- utopia 10
- Vanity Fair* 155
- vernacular 20, 178
- vicariously 17, 22, 34, 46, 179, 231
- victim's facial physiognomy 91
- Victor, M.F. 103
- victorian criminology 24
- viewer 34–35, 37, 39–41, 48, 71, 231, 234
- vigilante 6, 166, 169, 176–179, 223
- vigilantism 176–177
- vile 46, 119
- Villanelle 80–82
- violence/violent 15–16, 84, 104
 - subject 7, 11, 18, 21
 - sublime 11, 16, 42, 147, 178, 234, 246–247
- Virilio, P. 27
- virtuous 90–92, 116
- visceral involvement 23, 71, 82, 84
- visible investigator 47
- visual culture 74, 242
- volition 106, 129
- von Trier, L. 24, 119
- voyeurism 90, 116, 219, 227, 230, 235, 240
- voyeur style 216
- Vronsky 6
- Wainwright, T.G. 2
- Walkowitz, J.R. 97
- Waller, S. 14
- Walsh, F. 24, 109, 115
- Walter, J. 192–193
- Warwick, A. 97
- Watchdogs 2* 22
- Waters, S. 110
- web-based 166
 - Chinese suspense author 167–169
 - narratives of serial killing and initiates 170
- welfare 193–195

- Wen Chengyu 169
 Wesolowski, M. 13
 Western
 antiquity 177
 cinema 133
 Civilization 46
 classical canon 20
 criminology 6, 9
 culture 155
 culture predominately 116
 discourses of serial killing 17
 imagination 90
 metaphysics 235
 popular culture 7–8, 19–20
 signifiers 19
 Western Civilization 46
 Whistler, J. 3
 Whitechapel Murders 89, 94
 whodunnit 24, 133
Wicker Man, The 198
 Wilde, O. 43
 witness 2–4, 7–8, 18–19, 22, 26, 34, 83, 94,
 110, 114–115, 209–211, 219, 228, 231, 243,
 245
 witnessing 15, 18, 21, 23, 48, 71, 78, 243
 secondary 111
 Wojciehowski, H. 70–71
 woman psychopath 75
*Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-
 Century Fiction* 102–103
 Wood, E.E. 103
Worcestershire Chronicle 94
 working-class readership 97
 World Literature 18, 20, 167–168
 Worthington, H. 83
 Wotton, H. 44, 113
 wound culture 10, 18, 224, 227
 Wuornos, A. 9

Xionghua 168–169
 Xue Dalin 169

 Yellow journalism 24, 96
 Ye Shaohong 169
 Young, E. 155

 Žižek, S. 65

Serial murder is a global entertainment industry where the serial killer emerges as one of the most significant cultural figures of our time. No longer an exclusively Anglo-American phenomenon, narratives of serial killing are widespread in India, China, Japan, and other cultures. This book asks why this is the case, and how serial violence has been aestheticized in different contexts. It raises important questions regarding the ethics of spectatorship, complicity, and resistance. Unique in its transnational reach, it covers both novels and visual media, both West and East, both perpetrators and witnesses.

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ISBN 978-90-04-51909-1

ISSN 0927-5754

brill.com/tscl

107